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Karolos Koun and the Theatro Technis

Maggiar, Michael, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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A

KAROLOS KOUN AND THE THEATRO TECHNIS

By

MICHAEL MAGGIAR

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York.**

1990

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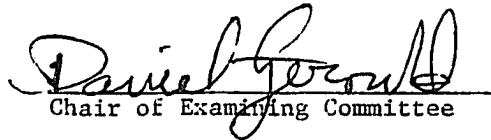
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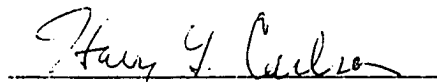
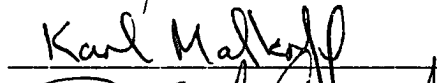
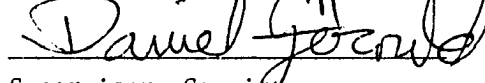
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Abstract

KAROLOS KOUN AND THE THEATRO TECHNIS

by

Michael Maggiar

Adviser: Professor Daniel C. Gerould.

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss the reasons that have earned Karolos Koun and the Theatro Technis a lasting reputation in modern Greek theatre. Although the study concentrates on the activities of Koun and the Theatro Technis, a significant portion of its objective is also to place them in the proper perspective within the total picture of post-Byzantine Greek theatre. This has necessitated an introductory chapter that lays the historical fundamentals and charts the most significant theatrical developments in Greece since the fall of Constantinople. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Vasiliko Theatro and the Nea Skini, two historically significant theatre companies founded in 1901, and a mention of the Karagiozis shadow theatre which occupies a special place in the history of Greek theatre as the first truly native form of drama to emerge in Greece since the country's independence.

Chapter II deals with Koun before the founding of the Theatro Technis. It covers his childhood and adolescence in Constantinople, his early education, his

repatriation to Greece, his artistic formative years with the Kolegeio Athinon and the Laiki Skini (1929-1939), and concludes with his emergence and recognition as a director in the professional theatre of Athens (1939-1942).

Chapters III, IV and V concentrate on Koun and his work with the Theatro Technis. Chapter III covers the first phase of the company's existence which ended with the company's dissolution in 1950. Besides providing the necessary historical information regarding the Theatro Technis's early years, this chapter also establishes many of the theoretical and aesthetic principles that led to its creation. Chapter IV opens with a brief discussion of Koun's activities during the interim years, before the company's regroupment in 1954, and then concentrates primarily on Koun's trailblazing work with the now celebrated generation of post World War II Greek playwrights. Chapter V deals with Koun's innovative and sometimes controversial direction of ancient Greek drama particularly during the 1960s when he received international recognition for his imaginative productions of Aristophanes' The Birds and Aeschylus' The Persians.

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For my mother Katerina Maggiar,
my sister Sophia Lambidonis,
and in memory of Carlos Flor, a friend.

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INTRODUCTION

A study of Greece's Theatro Technis (Art Theatre) has been long overdue. Other than the Ethniko Theatro, Greece's government subsidized national theatre, the Theatro Technis is the most distinguished theatre company to emerge in Greece in modern times and is considered by many to be the more dynamic and creative of the two. Its existence has spanned nearly half a century and, with only two intermittent pauses for reorganization and artistic refocus (1947 and 1950-1953), it has remained unfailingly at the forefront of modern Greek theatre.

The Theatro Technis was founded by Karolos Koun in 1942, during the darkest year of the German occupation. Today, Koun stands a towering figure in the history of modern Greek theatre and his influence on its growth and development is undisputed. Consequently, a study of the Theatro Technis is inseparable from a study of its founder, who imprinted his personality on the company and who retained his title as its artistic director from its

inception until the time of his death in 1987, at the age of seventy-nine.

Koun directed innumerable plays for the Theatro Technis, over the course of the years, chosen from a very diverse and eclectic repertory. He revolutionized the staging of ancient Greek drama and introduced the Greek public not only to the finest contemporary playwrights of the international scene but also helped launch, almost singlehandedly, the post World War II generation of Greek playwrights who are considered today the finest in the history of modern Greek theatre. Although one cannot find the equivalent in American theatre to such a long lasting relationship between a single artist and a theatre company, one can make the analogy that Karolos Koun was to the Theatro Technis and modern Greek theatre what George Balanchine was to the New York City Ballet Company and modern American ballet, or what Martha Graham continues to be to her own company and modern dance.

Surprisingly, nothing has been written in Greece or elsewhere in the form of a critical study on Koun and the Theatro Technis. Prior to Koun's death, four books had been published dealing with the man and his company. The first three, Theatro Technis 1942-1948, Karolos Koun 25 chronia theatro [Karolos Koun 25 Years of Theatre] (1959) and Theatro Technis 1942-1972, are anniversary editions issued by the company itself, at various stages of its existence.

They are comprised primarily of favorable reviews, photographs and brief complimentary articles by various colleagues and friends. The fourth book, Karolos Koun gia to Theatro [Karolos Koun on Theatre], was published in 1981 and is a pamphlet-size book of some of Koun's lectures and interviews given throughout the years. All four books offer valuable source material but do not provide a critical and historical framework that would place Koun and the Theatro Technis in the proper perspective in relation to modern Greek theatre. Posthumous works on Koun are slow in surfacing. With the exception of Karolos Koun, synomilies [Karolos Koun Conversations], a collection of interviews by Giorgos Pilichos of the newspaper Ta Nea, and the February-March 1987 issue of the literary magazine I Lexi, dedicated in its entirety to Koun, nothing by way of a study has yet to appear.

This absence of major works, however, is not confined to Koun and the Theatro Technis, but to the entire subject of modern Greek theatre. The reason may be attributed to the fact that the reestablishment of a theatrical tradition in modern Greece is a fairly recent phenomenon. The country's history as a national entity does not begin until the late 1820s when the war of independence against the Ottoman Turks led to the creation of the first Greek sovereign state since the fall of the Byzantine Empire four centuries earlier. Prior to independence, while the

country remained under Turkish rule, there is little evidence of any dramatic activity in Greece, with the exception of the Ionian Islands which were spared dominance by the Ottomans. With the coming of independence the theatre, usually the slowest art to develop in an emerging culture, was unsurprisingly slow in developing in Greece as well. A bibliography of critical works dealing with nineteenth and twentieth century Greek theatre and drama is negligible in comparison to a bibliography of critical works on Greek poetry or prose of the same period.

Practically nothing exists in English or any other language, beside Greek, about modern Greek theatre other than brief entries in history of theatre books and encyclopedias. The only notable exception is a doctoral dissertation by Alikì Bacopoulou-Halls titled "Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms" which has subsequently been published in book form in Greece.¹ This work offers a synopsis of the major theatrical influences and developments in Greece from the early Middle Ages to the present (1978), but concentrates mainly on the generation of Greek playwrights immediately following World War II. This generation is recognized today as being the most creative and innovative of modern times and is credited for being the first to reestablish an indigenous theatrical tradition

¹Alikì Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms. Athens: Diogenis, 1982.

that is intrinsically Greek and a reflection of its people. Karolos Koun and the *Theatro Technis* were instrumental in fostering the efforts of these playwrights by being the first to stage many of their plays.

There were also other factors, besides the country's inexperience and adolescence, that contributed to the late development of dramatic art in modern Greece. These range from a national identity crisis (a result of four hundred years of Turkish rule) to chronic political instability to recurrent foreign interference in the country's internal affairs. A language dispute that had raged for centuries and was resolved only a little over a decade ago (1977), did not make matters any easier.

The creation of a theatro technis [art theatre] was the means by which Karolos Koun sought not only to expedite the development of dramatic art in modern Greece but also to remedy the theatrical practices that had prevailed in the country during the first three decades of the twentieth century. These practices consisted, with only a few marginal exceptions, of the staging of two-dimensional French-style boulevard dramas, light musical-comedy revues and the popular farsokomodies [farce-comedies] of the 1930s. The Karagiozis shadow theatre, which had had its heyday during the first two decades of the century, was still very popular by the beginning of the 1940s but by now it was

geared more and more for the pleasure and entertainment of young audiences rather than the general public.

By the time of the Theatro Technis's conception in 1942, Greece was in its second year under German rule and Athens was caught in the grips of a devastating famine as a result of the occupation. Suddenly, all preconceived bourgeois notions that had dictated theatrical norms before World War II became immediately outdated, as the country became engulfed in one of history's greatest military upheavals. Although the conditions for establishing a theatre company were seemingly unfavorable due to the occupation and famine, they were also ideal, according to Koun, precisely because of those reasons. The harsh adversity of the times had instantly rendered obsolete the feeble intrigues of the boulevard drama and the petty lightheartedness of the musical-comedy revues and farce-comedies. People were now faced with drastic existential predicaments and time was too precious to be wasted on trivialities. These were stark, austere times of life and death, of struggle and sacrifice, of the fight for freedom and liberty and, deep down in the hearts of everyone, of the promise for a better and brighter tomorrow. The years of the occupation, as hard and inhuman as they were, were vital in setting the groundwork for a new beginning, because they united a people against a common enemy (an enemy that represented all the evil in human nature) and forced their

attention on some of the most fundamental issues of human existence. For Koun they were years:

. . . devoid of luxuries, superficialities and vanities. They were years of fear, violence and death. But at the same time they were also years of sacrifice, perseverance, hope and above all faith, an immeasurable kind of faith that we were all working and preparing ourselves for a better world. We loved and agonized for everyone around us and for all that were away from us. We all felt destined to serve together a common goal: the liberated human being, the virtuous human being.²

The demand for a theatro technis, however, was not the result of the war but was a need that had existed long before that. Two significant attempts at satisfying that need came at the turn of the century with the founding of the Vasiliko Theatro [Royal Theatre] and the Nea Skini [New Stage]. Both companies were historically momentous in the development of modern Greek theatre but extremely short-lived: they dissolved within just a few years of their creation. The founding of the National Theatre in the early thirties was the next important effort at a theatro technis and certainly a big step in the right direction. Unfortunately, in its formative years, the company was modeled after Western European companies and particularly companies of the German expressionist school. As a result, it alienated a large portion of the theatre going public who

²Giorgos Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies [Karolos Koun, conversations]. Edited by Odysseas Chatzopoulos (Athens: Kaktos, 1987), pp. 32-33.

All translations throughout this dissertation are mine unless otherwise noted.

found the productions of the National Theatre to be often elitist, foreign and cold.

Koun's theatro technis, on the other hand, was founded on the premise that good theatre has to be accessible to all and not only to a select and privileged few. He spent most of his life trying to prove that assumption, and it is his great success in that regard that has earned him and his theatre company a permanent place in the history of modern Greek theatre. Moreover, he succeeded in doing so (and this is particularly significant as it characterizes the essence of the man himself) without ever compromising his aesthetic perceptions or artistic integrity. The purpose of this study on Koun and the Theatro Technis, therefore, is to determine and expound on the reasons that have, over the years, earned them such a high and lasting reputation. This will entail, along with the establishment of the proper historical framework within which the company evolved, a discussion of the various attributes that together have given the Theatro Technis its character and identity, among them: aesthetic perceptions; theoretical principles; artistic and social objectives; training and discipline; directorial approach; choice of material; and actual productions.

Although this work concentrates on the activities of Koun and the Theatro Technis, a significant portion of its objective is also to place them in the proper

perspective within the total picture of modern Greek theatre. This has necessitated an introductory chapter that lays the historical fundamentals and charts the most significant theatrical developments in Greece since the fall of Constantinople and the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire, in A.D. 1453. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the Vasiliko Theatro and the Nea Skini and a mention of the Karagiozis shadow theatre. The Vasiliko Theatro and the Nea Skini were founded in 1901, as a result of the influence of the independent theatre movement in Western Europe, and marked the birth of the professional theatre company in modern Greece. They also signaled the emergence of the modern stage director as the dominant force behind production. The Karagiozis shadow theatre (although introduced to Greece via Turkey) occupies a special place in the history of modern Greek theatre as the only truly native form of theatre to emerge since the country's independence.

Chapter II deals with Koun before the founding of the Theatro Technis. It covers his childhood and adolescence in Constantinople, his early education, his repatriation to Greece, his artistic formative years with the Kolegeio Athinon and the Laiki Skini (1929-1939) and concludes with his emergence and recognition as a director in the professional/commercial theatre of Athens (1939-1942). It also introduces some of Koun's fundamental aesthetic perceptions, such as his "popular expressionism,"

which remained at the core of his artistic persona throughout his life.

Chapters III, IV and V concentrate almost exclusively on Koun and his work with the Theatro Technis. Chapter III covers the first phase of the company's existence which ended with the dissolution of the Theatro Technis in 1950 due to economic, political as well as artistic reasons. Besides providing the necessary historical information regarding the company's early years, this chapter also establishes many of the theoretical and aesthetic principles that led to its creation and which have subsequently become the foundation of its artistic objective. Chapter IV opens with a brief discussion of Koun's activities during the interim years, before the company's regroupment in 1954, and then concentrates primarily on Koun's trailblazing work with that now celebrated generation of post World War II Greek playwrights mentioned earlier. Chapter V deals with Koun's innovative direction of ancient Greek drama particularly during the 1960s when he received international recognition for his imaginative productions of Aristophanes' The Birds and Aeschylus' The Persians.

Karolos Koun and the Theatro Technis span nearly fifty years of twentieth-century Greek theatre. Their contribution to the growth and development of modern Greek drama will require many more studies in order to be fully

assessed and appraised. This dissertation makes no pretense of exploring more than just the tip of the iceberg. It broaches the subject of "Koun and the Theatro Technis," but when all is said and done it is merely a detailed outline of this distinguished director's career and of the company he founded. There are many areas of concentration that need to be more fully researched and examined in the future. Each chapter of this work (with the exception of the first) offers material that can be developed into one or more in-depth critical studies of this man who charted new paths for modern Greek theatre and whose name has become irrevocably linked with the reestablishment of an indigenous theatrical tradition in Greece in modern times. Odysseas Elytis, the great Greek poet and recipient of the 1979 Nobel prize for literature once proclaimed that "one day, when we will no longer be here, the people in the [theatre] aisles and wings will talk about the age of Koun."³

³Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis: 1942-1972
(Athens: Athinaiko Kentro Ekdoseos, 1972), n.p.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A LOOK AT MODERN
GREEK THEATRE PRIOR TO KAROLOS KOUN
AND THE THEATRO TECHNIS

In A.D. 1453, history was written differently from what the Greeks would have chosen. This was the year when the Byzantine Empire, whose existence had spanned over an entire millennium, came to its end. That darkest of all years for the Greeks was when the armies of the expanding Ottoman Empire overran Constantinople dealing the final blow in a series of events that led to Byzantium's ultimate collapse.

With the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire began a new period for the Greek speaking world which long before had become identified with Byzantium. From 1453 to 1830 most of Greece was to remain under the dominance and rule of the Ottomans. At a time when Western Europe was embarking on a rebirth of learning, Greece sunk into the darkest phase of its history. The conquerors' limitations and control over all forms of creativity resulted in their stagnation.

The only exception was a tradition of popular ballads and folk songs, a development of the early Middle Ages, which continued to flourish throughout the four hundred year occupation. When Greece was to regain its independence in 1830, it was to those popular songs that many poets and writers turned for inspiration.

But it was the theatre, along with all the other representational art forms, that suffered the most in Greece during the four centuries of Turkish dominance. Beside the physical restrictions imposed by a conqueror on the liberty and freedom of a conquered people, there were cultural restrictions that made any theatrical manifestation virtually impossible: the religious dogma of Islam forbade the direct representation of living things. As a consequence, all theatrical activities ceased for the entire duration of the Turkish rule. There is no evidence that any type of dramatic activity existed in Greece during the four-century dominance of the Ottoman Turk and no names of playwrights or plays have survived. As far as Turkish theatre is concerned there were two paradoxical exceptions, the Karagioz shadow theatre, whose two dimensionality gave it a special non-representational status, and the Orta Oyuna¹, a comic improvisational theatre reminiscent of the Commedia. Both types flourished during the eighteenth

¹A. C. Scott, The Theater in Asia (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973) p.87.

century in the Ottoman Empire but of the two, only the former bore an influence on modern Greek theatre. That influence, however, was not to manifest itself until many years after Greece's independence when the character Karagioz was in a sense naturalized and his name changed to Karagiozis.

The culture from which Western Civilization had sprung and which seemed to have given credence, through the achievements of times past, to Aristotle's theory that imitation is a natural instinct of human nature inducing man to both learn and create, found itself under the dominance of another culture that was fundamentally opposed to this tenet. The overwhelming pressure of the conquerors posed a serious threat to the cultural heritage of the Greeks, who regarded themselves as the descendants of the ancients and heirs to their civilization.

In the end, however, the indomitable conqueror proved unable either to destroy the culture of the Byzantine Civilization or to assimilate it into its own. In the introduction to his anthology *Modern Greek Poetry*, Kimon Friar, one of the leading disseminators of modern Greek literature to the West, after detailing the "horrendous chronology of subjugation, exploitation and inundation [of Greece] by foreign populations" that began with the brutal sack of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade

in A.D. 1204 and has continued well into the twentieth century, remarks that:

. . . throughout these long centuries the Greek character has miraculously preserved its original vigor, and that the modern Greek language is still the heir of the classical Greek tongue. I know of no other country, at least in the Western Hemisphere, which has retained such identity and integrity under such crushing odds.²

This preservation of "identity and integrity" is credited primarily to the work of the Greek Orthodox Church, which the Ottoman ruler felt was to his advantage not to antagonize. Through the power of faith and the meager educational means allowed, the church kept alive both language and knowledge, thus sustaining the cultural integrity of the Greeks which in turn fueled the flame of resistance that eventually led to the war of independence in 1821. The work of scholars and intellectuals bore little influence during that time since most of them worked and wrote abroad.

Before Greece was entirely overrun by the Ottomans, with the exception of the Ionian Islands, other powers such as the Franks, the Venetians and the Genoese, or the Latins as they were commonly referred to altogether, fought for possession of Greece and occupied various parts of the land. The anti-Greek sentiment of the Latins, originating in the eleventh century religious schism between Rome and Constantinople, as well as their political and economic

²Kimón Friar, trans. and ed. Modern Greek Poetry (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), pp. 5-6.

ambitions for the region, frequently resulted into violent and brutal conflicts that made the coming "infidel" seem almost like a saviour to the Greeks. It is often alleged that rather than submit to Latin rule, which also implied allegiance to the Pope, many Greeks preferred Turkish conquest as the lesser of two evils.

The stress on the Ottoman Empire's dominance, however, is made here not because of any intrinsically greater barbarism on the part of the Ottomans, but because of the cultural threat it posed. There is ample evidence to indicate, for example, that while the island of Crete was ruled by the Venetians, the Cretans enjoyed enough artistic freedom to put them on a course that would evolve into a prominent tradition in both poetry and drama. Brilliant works of the seventeenth century such as Vicenzos Kornaros' epic love poem Erotocritos and dramas such as Abraham's Sacrifice, which is also attributed to Kornaros, and Erophili written by Georgios Hortadzis, strongly attest to that notion. But fate had other plans for the Cretans: when the island finally succumbed to the Ottomans in 1669, Crete followed the same pattern as the rest of Turkish-conquered Greece, sinking into the same cultural darkness. The only part of Greece to escape the Ottoman onslaught was a cluster of seven islands in the Ionian Sea commonly known as Eftanisa. Until their independence, they were ruled for the most part by the Venetians and, as was the case with Crete,

a considerable degree of cultural tolerance was granted. It was in Zakynthos, one of the Ionian Islands, that the first truly modern Greek play, O Hasis, by Demetrios Gouzelis, was written around 1795.

The war for independence lasted from 1821 to 1829, and in 1830 Greece became an independent sovereign state. Along with independence, however, came the complex problems of a country that needed to be revitalized morally, culturally and economically. One struggle followed another as the country tried in a short span to catch up for the time lost during the four hundred year occupation. Athens was declared the country's capital in 1834 and became the nation's cultural center; any significant theatrical development from then on centered on the capital.

The rebirth of Greece found the country in a state of infancy and, borrowing from Aristotle once again, as "man learns first by imitation," so the Greeks embarked on a journey of cultural revitalization and learning that was, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, imitative. The main sources of imitation as far as the theatre was concerned were the works of the ancients, European post-Renaissance dramaturgy and the foreign theatre troupes that visited the country throughout the century.

The imitation of the ancients was championed by scholars and intellectuals, usually brought up and educated abroad, commonly referred to today as the "Greek Romantics"

or the "Old School of Athens." Their high ideals and romantic notions about an unspoiled reunification with ancient Greek tradition, noble and lofty notwithstanding, were very often incongruous with the needs of the public, they were trying to educate. Their basic tenet was that the best way to regenerate the national consciousness was by emulating the ancients through their language. It is no surprise that it was also at this time that the perennial "Greek language problem" solidified into the ever widening conflict between those who upheld demotiki (vernacular) as the national tongue and those who endorsed katharevousa (a purist, literary derivative of ancient Greek). Most of the scholars considered demotiki a language that had deviated from its indigenous course and, having lost its classical Greek beauty, had become an obstacle to the natural development of Greek culture, thought and tradition. They regarded it as an impoverished form of the language, filled with foreign words and far too limited for the creation of works of literary value. Their ambition to rescue Greek from the limitations of demotiki led them to the fabrication of katharevousa, a synthetic, pseudoliterary, unspoken language that was basically demotiki subjected to the grammar and syntax of ancient Greek.

For several decades following independence the vast majority of plays written were verse dramas of a stiff unbending iambic meter using that emulator of ancient Greek,

katharevousa. They were modeled either after the works of the ancients or the works of post-Renaissance European playwrights and were permeated by the imaginative and emotional flights of the romantic spirit of the times. Today most of these plays, filled with that obsolete rhetoric of the nineteenth century, seem to epitomize all the vices of romanticism and none of its virtues. They have long been removed from the list of performable or even readable plays and have become a mere footnote in the development of modern Greek drama. A few of the plays, however, did achieve a considerable level of excellence that transcended the rigidity of the language, as in the works of Alexandros Rizos Rangavis, (1809-1892) and Demetrios Vernardakis, (1833-1907), but their merit was more literary than dramatic and their appreciation almost exclusively among the literati.

At the same time, and at an accelerated pace, these same scholars were translating, always into katharevousa, plays from Western Europe. By the middle of the century they had introduced to the Greeks the most significant of European dramaturgy from the Renaissance to the present. But emulating the ancients or their European neighbors with antiquated iambs and an artificial language did not prove successful with the public, and the works of these men of letters as well as their translations met with rejection and failure on the stage.

The language problem was not new for the Greeks but with the establishment of katharevousa as an official contender for the national Greek tongue the camps were clearly delineated and the chasm between them widened. The problem grew into an enormous issue that eventually acquired political dimensions as the upholders of katharevousa came to be identified with elitist conservatism and the upholders of demotiki with populist progressiveness. Politically, the conflict wasn't resolved until 1977, when demotiki was overwhelmingly accepted as the country's national tongue, although the majority of writers and poets had already abandoned katharevousa as their medium as early as the turn of the century.

If, however, the romantic and visionary attempts of the scholars failed because of the scope and unreality of their dream, they did at best succeed in introducing and disseminating to the Greeks, in addition to the works and thought of the ancients, the major works and trends of post-Renaissance European drama from Elizabethan England to nineteenth century romanticism. This in turn bore a significant influence on the development of modern Greek thought and dramaturgy.

The influence of the foreign theatrical troupes that began visiting the country shortly after its independence proved to be far more successful than the works of the learned idealists. Most of these troupes came from Italy

and France, and their purpose was essentially to please and entertain rather than to instruct. Their repertory consisted primarily of Italian operas and Viennese operettas, although other types of drama were also presented. Italian opera, however, was by far the most popular among the works they staged. The visiting companies performed primarily for an upper middle class audience in makeshift theatres usually provided by the very rich or the aristocracy that surrounded the court of the newly established monarchy (1833) headed, paradoxically, by a Bavarian prince, Otto, the son of Louis I of Bavaria. For a period of over five decades the Greek theatrical scene was dominated by the whims of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie whose "refined" tastes were condescending towards the crude and primitive state of modern Greek theatre and turned to Western Europe for fulfillment.

Having no legitimate theatre of their own, no professional actors or even theatre buildings, the Greeks had very little choice but to turn to these foreign troupes for inspiration, instruction and innovation. Amateur imitations, mostly poor, abounded during those years but they helped pave the way for the first significant popular advance in modern Greek theatre that was to occur in the late 1880s. It was the custom in many legitimate theatres of Western Europe, such as the Comédie Française, to follow a serious play with a one-act comedy as a form of emotional

relief. The adoption of that practice by the Greeks proved very beneficial in the development and popularization of their theatre. During the predominance of the foreign troupes, one-act and later three-act comedies were written, in the demotic medium, that were basically imitations or adaptations of works by Molière, Labiche and Goldoni among others. The cultivation of comedy was an attempt at providing more entertainment for the pre-existing bourgeois audience and not an aim at breaking new ground. It had its apogee in the 1870s but it was never able to equal in popularity Italian opera or to win enough new hearts among a less genteel audience.

The dramatic breakthrough of the late 1880s was a synthesis of the prevalent comic and operatic influences of the time which resulted in the creation of a new genre with intrinsically Greek qualities and which immediately replaced in popularity all the existing foreign influences. This new genre, called the komeidyllio, was a loosely structured type of pastoral love comedy, written in the vernacular and interspersed with music, songs and, sometimes, folkloric dancing. For the first time identifiable Greek characters, albeit rustic and idyllically portrayed, were represented on stage in wholly Greek settings. A general audience was now able to sit through a performance without being bored by incomprehensible antiquated iambs or lulled to sleep by some visiting third-rate opera troupe. With the advent of the

komeidyllio came the quick demise in popularity of the foreign troupes which continued nevertheless to visit the country and exercise a valuable influence on Greek theatre in terms of acting, staging, costuming and other technical aspects.

The grand master of the komeidyllio was Demetrios Koromilas, (1858-1898), whose work I tihi tis Maroulas [Maroula's Fortune] first staged in 1889, is still performed today on occasion. Shortly after the arrival of the komeidyllio followed the dramatic eidyllio which was essentially the same as its predecessor in style and structure except that now the subjects treated were serious and heavily steeped in melodrama. Once again Koromilas led the way and the best representative work of the dramatic eidyllio is his play O agapitikos tis voskopoulas [The Shepherdess's Lover] which has also enjoyed occasional performances.

The pastoral plays were in vogue from 1889 to 1897 although by 1895 their dominance of the Greek stage had begun to wane. Their eclipse from popularity came partly as a result of a disastrous and humiliating military campaign in 1897 against Turkey which dealt a serious blow to the Greek romantic era and any nineteenth century utopian notions. One of the major contributions of the pastoral plays, besides their constituting the first truly popular theatre in modern Greece, was seen in terms of production

where efforts were made to represent characters and places with some semblance of authenticity. This tendency toward realistic representation was a foreshadowing of the greater need for realistic detail that would become necessary as Greece opened itself to the influences of the contemporary Western European movements of Realism and Naturalism.

Before dying out completely, however, the komeidyllio produced a very important offshoot. The mismanagement of national affairs during the last decade of the nineteenth century, particularly between 1893 and the year of the tragic setback of the irredentist campaign of 1897, seriously undermined the relevance of the pastoral plays' bucolic representations of Greek rustic life on the stage. The political climate of those years demanded satire and if the content of the komeidyllio was quickly becoming unsuitable and irrelevant for the times, its format lent itself perfectly for burlesquing the follies of the day. Taking as an example a very popular revue staged by a visiting Italian troupe in the spring of 1894, the Greeks soon put together their own revue, called it Ligo ap' ola [A Little Bit of Everything], opened in August of 1894 and, from that moment, a new branch was added to modern Greek theatre that has endured vigorously to the present.

The epitheorisis, as the Greek revue came to be known, was, like the komeidyllio, loosely constructed and interspersed with music, dancing and songs. The story line,

however, was dispensed with in favor of sketches whose theme was political satire. The prototypes of the epitheorisis were to be found in the French and English revues of the times which the Greek version closely resembled. In fact, in its early stages, the epitheorisis borrowed much from its foreign counterparts, especially musical numbers to which the Greeks substituted their own words. Ligo ap' ola was a phenomenal success and in no time set a trend that has by now become a tradition. Its intrinsic value was in its satire which lampooned, as a contemporary newspaper wrote, the "political, social and artistic events of the year."

With Ligo ap' ola setting the pace, the epitheorisis continued to thrive, albeit with setbacks, and has survived to the present day as the favorite type of theatre for the Athenian middle class. Every summer since 1894, with a few exceptions due to extraordinary circumstances, a new epitheorisis was mounted burlesquing various events of the previous year. It usually played all year round and numbers were freely added or dropped from time to time in order to remain fresh and up-to-date. As political satire, however, it did not fare too well through the years, mainly because of the recurrent instability and insecurity of Greek politics which frequently did not tolerate criticism. With satire constantly kept in abeyance the epitheorisis grew in time to resemble more a variety show while its latent

satirical impulses found expression only during periods of relative political stability.

The next significant step in the development of modern Greek theatre came as a result of that Norwegian tidal wave launched by Henrik Ibsen. The eighteen eighties and early nineties were years of relative political stability during which Greece underwent many social, political and economic changes resulting in a rapid urban development and an expanding middle class. Athens became a large crowded city with all the social, economic and political problems troubling the cities of the West.

By the beginning of the 1890s Greece was ready for the changes in the theatre that had swept all over Europe. The Komeidyllio and later the epitheorisis helped free the stage from the dominance of foreign troupes and the stilted "iambos" of the katharevousa. Their popularity clearly established the existence of an audience that needed a theatre it could relate to and understand. The well-made-play, mainly through the influence of the visiting foreign troupes, was rapidly capturing the hearts of the bourgeoisie with plays by writers such as Scribe and Sardou, while Greek admirers of the formula began hacking plays that were even less memorable than their prototypes. But, as was the case in Western Europe, the formula of the well-made-play proved a useful tool a few years later in the hands of playwrights who espoused the doctrines of Realism

and Naturalism. In the struggle between the archaistic katharevousa and the living popular demotiki great advances were made by the latter, largely through the efforts of a group of young poets who in the mid 1880s formed The New School of Athens to champion the demotic movement in poetry and prose against katharevousa and the excesses of Greek romanticism. During that period the Greeks also discovered the urban literature of Emile Zola.

Other than what has been mentioned above, the most significant advances as far as the theatre was concerned were the building of the Demotico Theatro Athinon (Municipal Theatre of Athens) in 1888, the first truly modern theatre with a proscenium stage in Greece, and the appearance of actors and actresses who were able for the first time to challenge in popularity the visiting Bernhardtts, Duses and Coquelins. By the end of the century, however, there were still no dramatic schools and the art of stage direction, design, costuming and make up remained at a very amateurish level.

The era of social realism and naturalism was officially ushered into Greece, as in other European countries, with a production of Ibsen's Ghosts. Grigorios Xenopoulos (1867-1955), considered by many to be the father of modern Greek theatre, was instrumental in the importation of Ibsenism in Greece. In 1894, in another historic first production of Ghosts, Xenopoulos, faced with an apprehensive

Athenian audience, prologued the performance with an introduction in which, in addition to a discussion of the play and its author, he virulently criticized the current state of modern Greek theatre:

. . . On a literary level we can regard ourselves as a province of France. Rarely do we acquaint ourselves with something foreign that has not been recognized first in Paris. For that reason, only when the commotion over Ibsen's plays reached our literary capital did we find ourselves also in a position to get acquainted with them. As you can see the responsibility for the delay is not strictly ours. . . . The Greek theatre needs to liberate itself from the thorns and thistles that block its way to progress. Is Ibsen the only one we have to get to know? There are so many others. Echegaray, Tolstoy, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann are all writing plays today that are incomparably superior to those of Ohnet and Sardou, whose works, in our short-sightedness, seem far greater than the better forms of dramatic art. Only when we get to know those other works; only when we learn that superior pleasures exist to those offered by the French and Italian repertory; only when we become accustomed to abhor the conventional lies of the stage, the vulgar tragic misfortunes, the improbable incidents, the iambs and our modern "hellenisms," and the murders and strangulations, only then will we be educated enough and acquire a knowledgeable public that will know how to discern the difference between the serious and comic monstrosities that our modern petty manufacturers of drama (and for the most part incompetent imitators of their models) are incessantly offering us, and the truthful, the healthy literary work, that will surely be offered to us by writers of the future.³

Xenopoulos' biting remarks about Greece's dependence on contemporary Parisian theatre for inspiration is understandable but not entirely justified. True, Sardou and

³Giannis Sideris, "Protopori tou theatrou: Oi vrykolakes kai o Xenopoulos" [The pioneers of the theatre: Ghosts and Xenopoulos], Nea Estia, November 1950, pp. 1380-1381.

many of his Parisian contemporaries did popularize a type of theatre that sacrificed character development and dramatic content for theatrical effects and intrigue, and true, the Greeks were quickly becoming addicted to it. But, although the "thorns and thistles" referred specifically to the Parisian Boulevard Theatre which was the darling of the Athenian bourgeoisie, Paris was also a trend setter during the last quarter of the eighteen-hundreds for many of the movements that struggled precisely against this kind of theatre. It should be noted that the very play he was introducing had its first important production in Paris by Antoine's Theatre Libre, a company that was to become the paradigm of the independent theatres that appeared all over Europe in the last decade of the century and the model of one of Greece's own first major theatre company, The Nea Skini, with which Xenopoulos became closely associated. But if Xenopoulos' criticism on the influence of contemporary French theatre was not entirely correct, he was right about everything else and his plea signaled the beginning of what was to coalesce in 1901 with the formation of the first two professional theatre companies in Greece. The historic significance of that first production of Ghosts in Greece, as well as the introduction given to the play by Xenopoulos, were reassessed over half a century later by the foremost Greek theatre historian, Giannis Sideris:

A few minutes before the first Greek production of Ghosts, at the moment when Xenopoulos was talking, a new

life began for our stage whose scope and significance has not yet been equaled.⁴

Soon after, Ibsen's influence began to proliferate and many emulators of the Master began to surface, the most notable of which were Xenopoulos himself and Giannis Kambysis, (1867-1902).

The beginning of the twentieth century marks the rise of professional theatre in Greece in the real sense of the word; a theatre where all the elements of production became the responsibility of people who were, relatively speaking, masters of their art. The combined efforts of the post-revolutionary years culminated in 1901 into the formation of two theatre companies whose ideal was the regeneration and development of dramatic arts on a highly artistic and professional level, free of commercial constraints. Both companies appeared almost simultaneously and had approximately the same life span. Their names were the Vasiliko Theatro (Royal Theatre) and the Nea Skini (New Stage), and to them is generally and rightfully attributed the beginning of professional theatre in modern Greece. Most significantly, they gave rise to the function of the director as it had evolved in Western Europe from the days of the Saxe-Meiningen troupe. Each company had its respective director. They were men who possessed a thorough and profound knowledge of the theatre and, although

⁴Ibid., p. 1382.

their artistic merits have been praised by some while questioned by others, there is no denying that they were the pioneers of their field and set the course for many to follow.

The Nea Skini was the dream of its founder Kostandinos Christomanos (1867-1911). He was born in Athens of a German mother and a Greek father. Born into a privileged family, he received the best possible education and in 1888, following the completion of secondary school, he went to Vienna for further studies. Four years later he returned to Greece for a brief spell leaving once again, first for Rome, where he became a Catholic in order to get access to the Vatican Library and then to Paris to study theatre. It was during these years that he was initiated into the principles of the Realistic and Naturalistic Schools as expressed in the work of the Theatre Libre of Antoine, an influence that was to become the impetus and backbone of his theatre company. He returned to Vienna again in 1896 where he became the tutor of Elizabeth, the empress consort of Austria. Shortly after the death of Elizabeth in 1898, he published Tagebuchblätter, his memoirs of his years with the Empress, whom he adored and idolized. Although banned in Austria, the memoirs were considerably acclaimed in the rest of Europe and achieved for him overnight notoriety. Almost immediately they were translated into French and Italian and later into Greek.

When he returned to Greece in 1899 he was received among literary circles as a renown and preeminent figure.

On February 27, 1901, Christomanos gathered at the ancient theatre of Dionysus in Athens a group of eight of the choicest men of letters of his time, among whom was the giant of modern Greek literature, Kostis Palamas, as well as Grigorios Xenopoulos. In a speech that aimed less at a pragmatic approach to the problem at hand and more at stirring the hearts of his listeners toward a vision for a new beginning, he delivered to them in a "D'Annunzian" fervor his proposal for the rebirth of dramatic activity in Greece deserving of the best that Western Europe had to offer:

I asked you to gather within this holy shell. . . because I wish our gathering to acquire a certain character of worship, almost like a sacred ceremony in front of these stands which trembled under the sounds of the highest tragic terrors. . . alongside the extinguished altar from which rose the illusive beauty of the Greek mind; a flame that illuminated the heavens of the human soul. I wanted, through a resounding invocation towards that secret beauty that lives within all of us and which weaves the web of our existence, to see it glow again; to brighten our lives. . .

. . . I assumed that we, assembled in this space, will see the holy fire upon the altar as a burning flame which we will maintain inextinguishable with our breaths. And for that reason, I wondered that if we could all contemplate the same dream, it will become a reality.

That dream is the renaissance of dramatic poetry and stage artistry in Greece. . .

. . . I imagine that the day will come when poetry and particularly its superior and most complete expression, the drama, will become once more the

synthesis of all the creative symbols, become once more the begetter of spiritual worlds.⁵

Christomanos' proposal, which was also printed and distributed for others to read, was a moving and passionate appeal. This brief excerpt is sufficient to reveal the kind of man he really was: a dreamer, a mystic, an idealist and, contrary to his admiration for and belief in the precepts of Realism and Naturalism, a true romantic. But the rebirth of theatre in Greece was an idea whose moment had arrived. This passionate appeal for its creation, coming from a man who commanded the respect and esteem of his audience, was all that was needed to spark the hearts of his listeners and stir many of them towards that collaborative effort that would make it a reality. The fact that he was a persuasive speaker with a beautiful voice made it even easier to win them to his cause. He motivated Palamas, for example, to write his only play Trysevgeni for production by the Nea Skini, a play that Fotos Politis, critic and later first director of the Greek National Theatre, described as "the finest of all modern Greek works in dramatic form." Indeed, it is a seminal work, a turning point in terms of language, subject matter and treatment, and is still regarded as an exemplary work of modern Greek dramaturgy. Another writer, Xenopoulos, later revealed that he had written his play The

⁵Myrtos Mavrikou Anagnostou, O Kostandinos Christomanos kai i Nea Skini [Kostandinos Christomanos and the Nea Skini] (Athens: G. Fexi, 1964), pp. 44-47.

Secret of Countess Valerena as a result of the influence that Christomanos' speech had exerted on him.

Immediately following that speech, the eight men signed a document declaring the founding of the Nea Skini. A few days later the same men formed a committee with a board of directors to oversee all the functions of the company, administrative and artistic, and a thirteen point declaration of principles was issued persuading more converts to the project, including financial backers. The burgeoning Nea Skini was off to an auspicious beginning.

Unfortunately, however, Christomanos' fiery temperament that had worked so well to inspire many to join him in the creation of the Nea Skini, proved too troublesome once the dream became a reality. The result was not exactly the collaborative effort he had formulated in his emotional proposal or the company's declaration of principles. Tenacious and stubborn, he was unable to share the vision of his dream with an artistic committee or the company's control with a board of directors. Although in principle he had agreed otherwise, in no time he assumed complete command over the company and proceeded to rule it with absolute authority. Years later, Xenopoulos, who was appointed general secretary of the Nea Skini during those early days of the company's existence, reminisced about the extent of his duties:

If you ask me now what I did as General Secretary of the "Nea Skini," I would answer: "nothing, absolutely

nothing"! As long as the Committee was maintained, I simply went to Christomanos' house to sign with him the "printed documents" but most of all to listen to his enchanting talk. But can any of the other "co-founders" boast of having done anything more than what I did? Everything, absolutely everything was done by him. In the end. . . he cut off the trustees and the secretaries, even the partners, and disbanded the committee, leaving himself all alone or at least with those helpers who, not being intellectuals, were able to help him humbly and truly.⁶

Christomanos was unsuccessful as the autocratic director in the style of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen that he would have liked to have been. He was rigid, inflexible and wanted everything done his own way. At the same time, however, he lacked the wherewithal to deal with the enormous difficulties facing him at that delicate stage of the company's existence. His uncompromising behavior gradually alienated him from his colleagues until he was left virtually all alone to carry on the "dream." Eventually the task proved too overwhelming and in its sixth year the company dissolved.

But during those six years the Greeks saw some of the finest theatre they had ever seen. The productions of the first two years especially, in spite of the increasing antagonism created by Christomanos' personality and temperament, received wide critical acclaim for their artistic merits and high professional standards.

Parallel to the formation of the Nea Skini, Christomanos founded an acting school for the purpose of

⁶Ibid., p. 51.

"instructing people able to interpret [dramatic works] according to the demands of the newer staging techniques." By "newer staging techniques" Christomanos was referring to the concepts and methods used by the exponents of Realism and Naturalism in the West. The responsibility of instruction was assumed by Christomanos himself. Students were chosen through competitions. Most of them were aspiring young actors who had practically no prior experience on the stage and whose ages ranged from late teens to early twenties. To initiate them into his higher vision of the theatre, Christomanos insisted they call themselves not "actors" but "mystes" meaning "initiates." In the long run, it is perhaps not the company itself but the acting school that left the greatest legacy. Most of the actors who had the privilege to study and work under Christomanos went on to have distinguished professional careers on the stage long after the dismantling of the Nea Skini. Kyveli Adrianou and Mitsos Myrat, particularly, became two of the greatest actors to grace the Greek stage in the twentieth century.

Two and a half months before the official opening of the Nea Skini, a "sneak preview" was arranged on September 5, 1901, for the benefit of some visiting Roumanian students. The plays presented were Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and D'Annunzio's Dream of a Spring Morning:

. . . the moment the stage curtain was raised, the public immediately understood from the opening scenes

that it was about to live the first steps of the "renaissance of art in Greece." Everything ugly had vanished: the pomposity, the melodramatic movements, the unnatural acting, the dirty costumes, the provincial drawing-rooms, etc. The Nea Skini was already fulfilling, from its first appearance, a miracle and was promising much more for the future.

The newspapers wrote with enthusiasm, especially about the actress who portrayed Juliet, and who was none other than the then very young and later celebrated Kyveli. . . . Romeo was Mitsos Myrat who was also, at the time, at the very height of his youth. And all the other actors, although appearing for the first time, presented a disciplined whole that was unheard of for the Athenian stage.⁷

The "disciplined whole," which relies so much on the work of a skilled director, was a phenomenon at that time for the Greek stage because the function of the director had not yet been established in Greece as an essential and vital part of production. Prior to that, stage direction, for any professional attempt, was handled in the style of the nineteenth century European star system. As for the frequent amateur productions where inexperience and lack of skill depended mostly on spontaneity for success, stage direction was achieved not through the use of a director per se, but as a result of either group effort or the directorial attempts of the playwrights or the translators.

Christomanos' introduction of the theatre director as the spine of the production process and the person most responsible for all the elements involved was at the time not only innovative but revolutionary. It was the culminating result of his years of wandering in Western

⁷Ibid., p. 59.

Europe where he had become deeply influenced by contemporary trends as expressed in the work of the independent theatres of the eighteen eighties and nineties, particularly Antoine's Theatre Libre, as well as the work of the Saxe-Meiningen troupe whose tours throughout Europe between 1874 and 1890 had dazzled and astonished the public with its productions. From the Saxe-Meiningen troupe, Christomanos acquired the notion of the director as the supreme authority behind a production whose primary function was to achieve a unified well-integrated whole. He oversaw all aspects of production down to the last detail, from the choice of plays to the sewing of the costumes. Like the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, he strengthened and consolidated his authority over the company by using amateur actors rather than professionals or stars, which in turn enabled him to treat all roles, regardless of size, with equal importance and also helped him to promote ensemble playing.

The Theatre Libre's influence on Christomanos led to his growing interest in contemporary theatre movements, particularly in Realism and Naturalism. As was the case with Antoine, he held Ibsen in a venerable position and, like Antoine, he wanted a theatre company dedicated to introducing the public to the works of that new breed of playwrights that followed in Ibsen's wake. This explains the inexhaustible striving for authenticity and truth in terms of acting and stage design that characterized so many

of Christomanos' productions at the Nea Skini. In fact, there were times when, in keeping with Antoine's meticulousness in representing realistic sets, he bordered exaggeration:

. . . It is well known that the moment came when he brought his naturalism to the extremes of his. . . views, when he used manure for [Tolstoy's] The Power of Darkness or when he took great care that the little bottle of La Locandiera was an authentic Venetian one; in one of his first. . . productions. . . he covered the stage with real grass. . . . The same evening, in D'Annunzio's Dream of a Spring Morning, he wrapped the dress of Th. Dracopoulou (the crazy woman) with real ivy.⁸

Such extravagant attempts at representing truth and reality on stage were not new, of course, in other parts of Europe. Antoine, as far back as 1888, had used real meat carcasses on stage to create the proper environment for The Butchers. The need for such extreme methods of representation rose out of that greater struggle of the times against the artificiality and shallowness of the melodrama and the well-made-play.

Although Christomanos regarded very highly the aesthetics of the Realist and Naturalist movement, he was not exclusively bound to them. As was the case with the Theatre Libre, the repertory of the New Skini was not limited solely to works of that genre. Unlike Antoine, however, he did not confine himself strictly to the

⁸Giannis Sideris, Istoria tou neou Ellinikou theatrou 1794-1908 [History of modern Greek theatre 1794-1908] (Athens: Ikaros, 1961), p. 215.

production of contemporary plays but was much more eclectic in his choice of material. Furthermore, unlike the Theatre Libre whose rule was to present only one foreign play a year, the Nea Skini averaged almost the opposite. In its six-year history it presented only seven full-length and three one-act plays by modern Greek playwrights. In contrast, foreign drama was more than adequately represented by forty-three full-length and twenty one-act plays. From the classical Greek repertory, Christomanos staged a total of three plays.

Whereas no one would rightfully claim the existence of a multitude of good modern Greek plays at the time, the striking imbalance of the Nea Skini's repertory has led to some justifiable criticism of Christomanos in questioning how was one expected to achieve the rebirth of theatre in modern Greece when he concentrated so little on Greek playwrights:

The Nea Skini did not only slip away from its basic intentions but also forgot its original promises.

It presented sixty-three foreign full-length and one-act plays, opposite ten modern Greek and three ancient Greek plays.

The analogy. . . is expressive in itself. But the most important thing is that Christomanos. . . , who aimed at the creation and development of modern Greek dramaturgy, neglected the three or four noteworthy plays that were there already, and relied on mediocrities.⁹

⁹Mitsos Lygizos, To neoelliniko plai sto pangosmio teatro [Modern Greek theatre within the context of world theatre], 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Athens: Dodoni 1980), 2:422.

The "mediocrities" refer not to Christomanos' choice of foreign plays but to his ten modern Greek productions. The "three or four noteworthy plays," refer to the Cretan classic Abraham's Sacrifice, two isolated nineteenth century Greek masterpieces O Vasilikos and Vavylonia, and Palamas' Trysevgeni which, as noted before, was specifically written for the Nea Skini but was eventually and regrettably rejected by Christomanos.

As previously mentioned the first two years of the Nea Skini were the most successful in terms of artistic excellence, public acceptance and critical acclaim. The productions adhered uncompromisingly to the standards on which the company was founded. In spite of Christomanos' autocratic behavior and his gradual alienation from every one, he managed to remain during that time in good control of the company. The breaking point, however, had to come sooner or later as it finally did when he rejected Palamas' Trysevgeni, in the summer of 1903, on the grounds that it was dramatically weak. In fact, Christomanos was willing to stage the play provided its author conceded to some changes and revisions. Naturally Palamas refused to accept Christomanos' alterations of his work, calling them an "expression of the dictatorial temperament of the company's director." The press was not kind to the founder of the Nea Skini following his rejection of Trysevgeni and he was bitterly derided for his decision in most newspapers. He

defended himself with his own eloquent but bitter rebuttals to his critics, but by that time he had more enemies than friends and, making matters worse, found himself even more alienated than before.

The next three years proved more and more difficult as the box-office failures outnumbered the successes. Although the quality of the productions continued to adhere as much as possible to his original high standards and artistically compared very favorably to whatever else was happening at the time, his critics were far too harsh on him and, most of the time, unfair. In an effort to win back some of his lost audience as well as to compete with the commercial boulevard theatre of Athens, Christomanos began adding contemporary French boulevard dramas to his repertory in 1903. This action, however, provided his critics with more ammunition to question his integrity and ultimately backfired.

In the autumn of 1905 Christomanos, tired, disillusioned, almost bankrupt and in poor health relinquished the control of the ill fated Nea Skini to his two leading actors, Kyveli and Myrat. The company lasted another year and was finally disbanded in 1907. The illustrious careers that many of the company's actors went on to achieve, however, continued to shape the growth and development of modern Greek theatre.

Competing with the Nea Skini for the regeneration of dramatic arts during the same period was the Vasiliko Theatro [Royal Theatre]. The idea behind the creation of a royal theatre, in essence a national theatre, went back to 1880, during the reign of King George I, a Danish prince who had succeeded the deposed Otto. It was the king, in fact, who decided a year later in response to growing demands to create a national theatre. The initial financing was to come from a large philanthropic contribution made by a wealthy Greek merchant. Although the decision was taken in 1881, the lack of responsible people to assume the management of such a project, as well as internal bickering and politicking, led to a lengthy delay that wasn't settled until more than fifteen years later. It was in 1897 that all the issues were finally resolved and the first actual steps taken towards the founding of the company, beginning with the construction of the building that was to house the national theatre, now christened Vasiliko Theatro. Construction lasted four years and on November 24, 1901, two days after the official opening of the Nea Skini, the Vasiliko Theatro had its long awaited premiere.

Unlike the Nea Skini, whose permanent home was a simple unassuming open-air summer theatre that remained closed during the winter months while the company either toured or performed in rented spaces, the Vasiliko Theatro possessed a theatre that offered all the architectural and

technological advances of its Western European counterparts. It operated year round and, in addition to functioning as the home of its own company, it was also the ideal choice for the renowned foreign actors and their troupes that came occasionally to play in Greece. The list of foreign actors who have performed on the stage of the Vasiliko Theatro is quite prestigious, including Coquelin, Mounet-Sully, Gabrielle Rejane, Sarah Bernhardt, and Isadora Duncan to name but a few. Whereas the Vasiliko Theatro, like the Nea Skini, had a very short life span, its theatre building was more fortunate, and when the Vasiliko Theatro was revived in 1931 as the Ethniko Theatro [National Theatre], it became the home of the Greek National Theatre and has remained so to the present.

The most important figure behind the Vasiliko Theatro was the King himself. The court's influence was felt in all areas, from the choice of plays to establishing a proper dress code for the audience. Even the beginning of a performance had to be determined by a signal from the royal box. Aggelos Vlachos, a former diplomat who had distinguished himself as a playwright and man of letters in the latter part of the nineteenth century, became the company's managing director. He was widely respected among intellectual circles for his knowledge and wisdom, but his preference for katharevousa over demotiki was not conducive to the creation of a national theatre with a broad scope.

This is not surprising, however, when considering that the Vasiliko Theatro was not founded to fulfill the need for change but the need to aesthetically improve the old, the familiar and the accepted. It was essentially a bourgeois theatre intended for the enjoyment of the court, the upper classes and those who could afford it. To a great extent, Vlachos exemplified the visionary but delusive intellectual spirit of the old-line literary school of the previous century with its romantic appeal to a greater and more glorious past.

The saving grace of the Vasiliko Theatro and, artistically, the man most closely associated with it was neither the King nor Aggelos Vlachos but Thomas Oikonomou who was employed by the company specifically for the purpose of directing. This was the first time in modern Greek theatre that the pursuit of directing was given credence as a profession, and Oikonomou is reputed to be Greece's first professional director. Although his career was launched at the same time as that of Christomanos' and are both credited for being the first to establish the importance and need of the director, the difference between the two was that while the latter was basically self-employed and self-proclaimed the former was hired for the job and earned his living from it. Oikonomou was not the only one to direct for the Vasiliko Theatro but he was certainly its leading and most influential director. During his tenure there,

until his resignation in 1905, the company presented the finest work of its seven-year history.

Like the Nea Skini, the Vasiliko Theatro offered, at its inception, a school for the training of young actors with Oikonomou as the acting instructor. The idea, however, was short lived and the school never actually operated. As a result, the company had to hire professional actors whose methods and temperaments were not always conducive to ensemble playing.

The Vasiliko Theatro had its share of star-making as well, with its most important contribution among others being Marika Kotopouli, a budding young actress when taken into the company, who blossomed into "the leading lady of leading ladies" as she was often referred to later in her career. Along with Kyveli, she dominated the Greek stage for decades.

Opening night was the social event par excellence. A caravan of elegant horse drawn coaches trekked the muddy dirt roads leading to the theatre, bringing with them the finest that Athenian society had to offer. King George himself appeared in the royal box five minutes before the performance and was given the most enthusiastic reception for his efforts that led to the creation of the company. The evening's long program began with the Greek national anthem, followed in three parts and two intermissions by a long monologue, a full length play and a one-act play to

close the evening. There were musical interludes as well consisting of orchestral excerpts from works by Wagner, Bizet, Ponchielli and Zibulka. The following day the premiere performance of the Vasiliko Theatro received the accolade of all the newspapers.

Oikonomou was a supporter of the use of demotiki and given the limitations of his position and the nature of the Vasiliko Theatro it is remarkable that he was able to accomplish so much in promoting and extending its use on the stage. In an article published shortly after Oikonomou's untimely death, in 1929, Fotos Politis, who had been at times Oikonomou's harshest critic, recalled what he and the Vasiliko Theatro would be best remembered for:

. . . From the stage of the first theatre of Athens, a royal theatre, a very formal one, were heard for the first time pure demotic verses in tragedies. Under the leadership of Thomas Oikonomou, demoticism conquered the stage with wonderful victories, and has remained there permanently. Goethe's Faust, Iphigenia in Tauris, Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Winter's Tale, The Taming of the Shrew, Grillparzer's The Ancestress, The Waves of the Sea and of Love, Kleist's The Broken Jug were all performed in demotiki. . . . And from the younger poets, plays by Ibsen, Bjornson and Hauptmann were selected and taught. . . . Thus, our generation has had the great pleasure not only to hear the choicest plays of the international repertory but to see them performed to perfection as well. . . . Whenever the Vasiliko Theatro was the responsibility of Oikonomou, art rediscovered its value: it was joy, comfort and liberation.¹⁰

As one might suspect from the above quote, however, foreign plays dominated the Vasiliko Theatro's repertory as

¹⁰Fotos Politis, Eklogi apo to ergo tou [Selections from his oeuvre], 2 vols. (Athens: Estia 1938), 2:80-81.

well. Of the one hundred and twenty-four plays staged, one hundred and one were foreign, seventeen modern Greek and hardly remembered today, and six classical. As was the case with the Nea Skini, this apparent imbalance was subject to criticism, particularly from those who felt that the Vasiliko Theatro, the closest thing to a national theatre, should have made greater efforts in promoting modern Greek drama by encouraging young playwrights and by staging the few praiseworthy modern Greek works that were in existence at the time. On the other hand, others have defended the prevalence of the foreign repertory stressing the sparsity of good current Greek plays and arguing that the foreign works were ideal models for young Greek dramaturses to build and develop their skills.

In his work Theatrika chronika [Theatre chronicles], Michail Rodas, another prominent critic of the times, testified with enthusiasm to the historic significance of the Vasiliko Theatro:

. . . Whatever transpired there in the few years of its life constitutes a historic development for the Greek theatre. The actors perceived the real course of their profession, they studied assiduously, setting aside extemporaneousness, the great enemy and yet companion of the modern Greek world, and became, in short, an example of hard work. From that work rose like a volcano, like lightning, Marika Kotopouli.¹¹

The theatre historian Giannis Sideris, however, paints a different picture in his Istoria tou neoellinikou

¹¹Michail Rodas, Theatrica chronika [Theatre chronicles], 2 vols. (Athens: 1931), 1:9.

theatrou [History of Modern Greek Theatre]. While acknowledging the historic significance of the Vasiliko Theatro in the development of modern Greek theatre, he concludes that its ultimate failure was essentially not in its choice of plays but in the manner in which they were interpreted, which was both foreign and unappealing to Greek sensibilities. Matters were made even worse by the company's poor administration which he likens to a government service:

. . . Although by comparison with the Nea Skini, the foreign playwrights were not different or more numerous, the general atmosphere of the Vasiliko was different. There was something heavier about it, something not Mediterranean but like a small town in Denmark or Germany, with fog. . . . The Vasiliko did not discover anyone that had not already been distinguished before. Sluggish and barren, like a government job, where no one embraces the sum total of the work, how could it create miracles? . . . The Vasiliko burdened its public because of its distance and because of its conventional worldliness which, no matter how much it may have flattered the snobbishness of some, had nothing really Greek about it. On the contrary, it disliked the Greek sensibility.¹²

Another more contemporary historian, Mitsos Lygizos, in his own account of modern Greek theatre, arrives at the same conclusion as Sideris on the foreignness of the Vasiliko Theatro by insisting on the limitations of Thomas Oikonomou whom he found lacking the qualities needed to bolster and motivate dramatic development in Greece because of his foreign upbringing:

¹²Sideris, Istoria tou Ellinikou theatrou 1794-1908, p. 224.

. . . Oikonomou was a well-instructed worker of the theatre, not a leader or someone able to inspire. Greece's environment and problems could not inspire him because he was not brought up in this country. He came here to apply whatever he learned in foreign countries, regardless of whether they could bear fruit or not. He staged beautiful productions, which left, however, no tradition because, from an interpretive point of view, they had nothing in them that related to the Greeks. Everything was canned. Even the sets were brought ready-made from Germany.

For these reasons and many more, this theatre did not become the property of the people. The heart of the Greek public was left out. It was a theatre belonging to the court of George I.¹³

Although Oikonomou may have taken great strides in promoting the use of demotiki on the stage, as Fotos Politis points out, the language problem was far from being resolved. The demotic movement was still young at the time and its detractors many and often violently opposed to it. On November 3, 1903, a protest by a group of conservative students against an assumed demotic production of the Oresteia by the Vasiliko Theatro, led to a confrontation with the National Guard that resulted in the death of four students. Consequently, a decision was taken by the Vasiliko Theatro shortly afterwards requiring the use of katharevousa for all translations. That incident seems to mark the beginning of the company's artistic decline as it shifted more and more towards commercial theatre in order to avoid any further language related confrontations as well as to compete with the popular Athenian boulevard theatres.

¹³Lygizos, To neoelliniko plai sto pangosmio theatro, 2:423-430.

This move may have contributed to Oikonomou's growing displeasure with the company which ultimately resulted in his resignation in 1905.

The perennial Greek language question was a problem that echoed the psychological turmoil of the Greeks as they struggled to assert themselves following centuries of foreign dominance. The disagreement between the adherents of katharevousa and those of demotiki transcended the mere issue of language: it reflected the struggle of a people in search of an identity. While the former sought their role models in Antiquity or Western Europe, the latter, distrustful of any further foreign intrusion into their lives, felt that a strong sense of identity could only arise from a shared experience

In general, however, the problems that beset the Vasiliko Theatro began almost immediately after its celebrated premiere. Although the productions of the next two or three years were by most accounts artistic triumphs, their success in that respect was not sufficient to prevent the economic difficulties that set in once the accolades of the opening night died out. Contemporary reports attest to the sparsity of spectators throughout the company's brief history. Fotos Politis, who claimed to have attended the Vasiliko Theatro at least twice a week, confessed that there were times when it seemed as though the only people in the audience were himself and Ambassador Elliot of England,

who was a theatre lover and an habitue of the Vasiliko Theatro as well.

There are many reasons for the poor audience turnout, two of them being the high cost of the tickets and the difficulty of getting to the theatre. But there were other reasons also, more fundamental to the company's internal structure, that led to the Vasiliko Theatro's ultimate demise such as its inadequate and unskilled management, the lack of an intellectual discipline and theory for company members to follow and the lack of consistency and method in the choice of repertoire and acting technique. By 1908, deserted by nearly everyone, the company was on the brink of bankruptcy. When the King was informed that the coffers of the company were empty he refused to allocate any more money and the Vasiliko Theatro became history.

One type of theatre that evolved in Greece after the Tourkocratia [Turkish rule] stands in a class by itself. It's the Greek shadow theatre which developed spontaneously from its Turkish ancestor and became the most popular theatrical form among the common people around the turn of the century.

Karagiozis, the Greek adaptation of the Turkish Karagioz shadow theatre, made its first documented appearance in Greece in 1841, in the city of Nafplio near Athens. Prior to this there is no evidence to indicate that

it had existed in Greece either in its Turkish or Greek forms although it seems highly improbable that the Greeks could have been unfamiliar with it after four centuries of Turkish dominance. The second mention of Karagiozis appeared, after an eleven year silence, in 1852, this time for a performance that took place in Athens. From then on its documentation became more and more systematic as it grew steadily in popularity. Eventually Karagiozis emerged as the only truly indigenous type of theatre to evolve in Greece following independence having grown and developed naturally without the constraints of the political and intellectual spectrum. Giorgos Ioannou, in his introduction to Karagiozis, a collection of Greek shadow theatre playlets, divided the development of this type of theatre in Greece into three stages:

1. From about 1850 to 1880. In this period Karagiozis is sharply similar to its Turkish counterpart and the process of hellenization is very slow.

2. From about 1880 to 1910. This is the golden age of Karagiozis, particularly during the first decade of the twentieth century. . . . Its classical repertory is created. . . and its most important characters are conceived. . . which are representative of modern Greek society. The unfortunate thing is that the puppet players of this time never thought of having their playlets printed and no one came up to transcribe them.

3. The third period we can say begins roughly about 1915 and lasts until 1940. This period is characterized if not by its great creativity at least for its perfection.¹⁴

¹⁴Giorgos Ioannou, ed. O Karagiozis, 2 vols. (Athens: Ermis 1978), p. XXXIV.

It was during the second period that the Greek shadow theatre completed its hellenization by relinquishing the ribald often vulgar humor of its Turkish prototype for a more respectful type that made the shadow theatre accessible to a wider audience which now included women and children. Most of the Turkish characters were gradually eliminated in favor of new ones with which the Greek public could more readily identify and relate to. Ultimately many of them became stock characters with the surviving Karagiozis continuing as the protagonist although he himself underwent many changes. One of these was the replacement of the grotesque "Aristophanic" phallus of his Turkish predecessor with a long arm that is perpetually dispatching blows.

The hellenized Karagiozis shadow theatre was genuine folk theatre that grew out of the social conditions of nineteenth century Greece. The secret of its success lay in its spontaneity and freshness. As long as it was able to reach the hearts of ordinary people and remain in touch with life as it unfolded from day to day it remained fresh, lively, unselfconscious and a truer more objective reflection of life than that achieved by any other "legitimate" theatrical attempt. Its cast of characters were caricatures of specific types with which all Greeks were familiar. Karagiozis himself was the symbol of the downtrodden Greek during Turkish rule: slightly hunchbacked and pathetic looking, with an ugly face disfigured by a huge

nose and always barefoot, he had, nevertheless, an unparalleled hold on the hearts of the Greek people, for in spite of everything he was a sympathetic and human figure who always somehow managed to endure and survive the frowns of fortune.

If one were to look for an equivalent to him in the West the finest example perhaps would be Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, for just as the Tramp became the "universal man of modern times" and was loved all over the world, so did Karagiozis acquire similar attributes for the Greeks and was loved for the same reasons. Both characters shared much in common such as their wretched poverty, their petty thievery, their inability to hold on to jobs and, of course, their constant bouts with authority, power and the law that always ended in blows.

In the mid 1920s the Karagiozis shadow theatre was discovered by the cultural and intellectual mainstream and much has been written about it ever since. By this time, however, the shadow theatre was in the third and final stage of its development. Although it continued to be very popular well into the thirties, this product of the Industrial Revolution that was able, time after time, to rise above social, political or economic upheavals and make people laugh, was nevertheless too naive to compete against the horrors unleashed by the Second World War. The humiliation suffered by humanity as a result of that war was

infinitely greater than any humiliation suffered by the character of Karagiozis and the world that emerged from it was far too meaningless and absurd for him to adopt. As a symbol and archetype, however, Karagiozis did not die out but continued to exercise a strong influence on Greek theatre, particularly on the post-World War II playwrights whose plays are regarded today as the most important body of work of modern Greek dramaturgy.

With the passing of the Nea Skini and the Vasiliko Theatro, Greek theatre entered into a new period that was dominated by the work of the actresses Kyveli and Kotopouli and their respective companies. Until the founding of the Ethniko Theatro [Greek National Theatre], in 1932, which brought a resurgence in theatrical activity and creativity, the Greek stage was usually associated with their names.

Apart from them, very little was done deserving any merit and for the next few years Greek theatre, in general, retrogressed. Boulevard drama and the Epitheorisis continued to thrive, remaining very popular among the middle classes, but contributed nothing in raising theatrical standards. Several noteworthy but shortlived attempts at infusing the stage with new life were made during the nineteen twenties with the creation of such companies as the Company of the Athens Odeon (1918-1924), the Greek Theatre Company (1919), the Art Theatre (1925), the Free Stage (1929-1930) and the

Folk Theatre (1930).¹⁵ For any significant advance, however, modern Greek theatre had to await until the following decade with the appearance of the National Theatre. It was in the nineteen thirties as well that Karolos Koun began his long and distinguished career in the theatre in Greece.

¹⁵Lygizos, To Neoelliniko plai sto pangosmio teatro, 2:423-430.

CHAPTER II

1908-1941: THE YEARS PRECEDING THE THEATRO TECHNIS
KOUN'S LIFE FROM CHILDHOOD IN CONSTANTINOPLE
TO ARTISTIC SUCCESS IN THE
PROFESSIONAL/COMMERCIAL THEATRE

Karolos Koun was not a scholar of the theatre. He was not a theoretician and never dealt in intellectual abstractions about the meaning or purpose of drama. And yet he was in every sense of the word a man of the theatre. In the fifty five years that he served his muse with ascetic self denial, Spartan discipline and total devotion, he created an unmatched legacy for modern Greek theatre. In the course of his long career, he directed nearly two hundred and fifty plays, most of them with the Teatro Technis, the company he founded in 1942, during the German occupation. He was instrumental in the introduction of some of the most important plays of the modern international repertory, played a significant role in voicing and

establishing post-World War II Greek drama--the most creative and exciting period of modern Greek dramaturgy--and, in many respects, revolutionized the interpretation and presentation of ancient Greek drama. He remained active with the Theatro Technis until the time of his death in February of 1987, making it Greece's second oldest theatre company in modern times after the National Theatre, created in 1932.

Koun's dedication to his art was so complete and his artistic integrity so uncompromising that, to many, he became the living embodiment and symbol of the theatre. Like the philosopher Socrates, with whom he shared much in common as a man, Koun never wrote about his work. He never published an autobiography or any kind of book on the theatre. With the exception of a few speeches, an occasional newspaper article and several interviews given at a later stage of his career, little else has come directly from him in printed form on his life's work.

To those who knew him and worked with him he was always known as the "the teacher," one of the many attributes he shared with the great philosopher. Even after his death, people continue to remember him and refer to him as such, a title he earned not so much for what he taught but for what he exemplified. In essence he was the lesson, he was the example.

Koun was an intuitive man who was able to capture meanings and truths and impart them on the stage, without the deconstructive effect sometimes inherent in rational thought and inference. Although he was well educated and profoundly knowledgeable about the theatre, his interest in it was not academic or intellectual, at least not explicitly, even if his work has been the subject of scholars and critics for many years. His perceptions were those of an artist, like a painter who captures color and line or a sculptor who captures form and, without being fundamentally capable of explaining the logic behind it, create texture, shape and form. When, in a speech he made in 1943 defending the raison d'être of the Theatro Technis, he came to a point where he had to elaborate on the aesthetic line or principles the company would follow, he began first with an apology:

The accounting of aesthetic perceptions for me is similar in nature to a confession. For an artist to speak of the truths he has perceived, or imagines he has perceived, is to uncover something sacred from the deepest recesses of his self, something that he often fears to touch himself, held back by a sense of respect, worship, emotion, shame, uncertainty and maybe even fear that by touching it he will damage it. . . . Clive Bell, one of the foremost contemporary aestheticians, in a study he made on Cézanne discusses this point very well. If I remember correctly, he claims that the artist is the least able person to analyze or explain his own work. He gropes in the dark until once in a while a spark of light inspires him to move on. He does not stop to explain what the light was or how and why it illuminated, but moves further and further. . . lest he be transformed, like Lot's wife, into a column of salt if he stopped to look back and observe.

That is why I have always hesitated to discuss my aesthetic perceptions, not only with others but even with my own self. I always felt the time was either not right, or that the definition of my ideas was not fully conceived or that it shouldn't perhaps be fully conceived, for fear that with comprehension and crystallization the subconscious might become sterile and that I too would be transformed, like Lot's wife, into a column of salt.¹

It would be easy perhaps, with these words, to dismiss Koun for lacking authority in his convictions, had he not proven otherwise with his work. The irrational nature of artistic creation is not the product of systematic knowledge as Socrates demonstrates so rationally in Plato's dialogue the Ion. In fact, it is the danger to systematic knowledge which ultimately must lead to the expulsion of all the poets from the ideal state. Although himself a poet, Koun's poetic genius did not lie in his few surviving poems but in his ability to transform words and actions into poetic visions on the stage. When he spoke of the fear that with comprehension and crystallization of his ideas the subconscious might be rendered sterile he was, in a sense, voicing the dangers inherent in the exclusion of the irrational from the creative process, as would all ideal states whose very existence presupposes its exclusion. It should be remembered as well that when he made that speech Greece was under the iron rule of a power that also proclaimed the creation of an ideal state.

¹Marios Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro [Karolos Koun on theatre]. (Athens: Ithaki, 1981), pp. 22-23.

The most important thing revealed, however, by the above quote, and in the entire speech for that matter, lies not in the difficulty of defining aesthetic perceptions but in the sacredness that Koun attributes to them. Artistic creation, for him, was not the subject of rational thought but the product of a spiritual awareness attained through complete dedication and devotion to one's art. His entire life was a paradigm of such dedication and devotion and therein lies the secret of why, besides his achievements on the stage, he had such a profound influence on every one who came in contact with him and the reason he became known as the "teacher."

He was born in Bursa, Turkey in 1908 and grew up in Constantinople where his parents had moved when he was barely six months old. There he lived, uninterruptedly, for the first twenty years of his life, growing up in relatively affluent surroundings, amidst a large family that kept close contact with its Greek culture and tradition. He came from a long line of merchants and businessmen whose past offers no evidence of having directly influenced his inclination towards the theatre. There was, however, a kind of theatricality, a pageantry of sorts, in the daily life of Constantinople that may have played a part in shaping the sensibilities of the young boy destined to become perhaps the most celebrated theatre director Greece has produced this century.

Constantinople, or Istanbul as it is known to most of the world, has always been a cosmopolitan city, a place where East meets West. As the capital of the Ottoman Empire it acquired, in time, an unparalleled cultural and ethnic richness and vitality which reached its peak in the nineteenth century. Although mostly Turkish, the city's population included large communities of Greeks, Armenians and Jews who contributed greatly in giving the city its special character. While Koun was growing-up there, in the early part of the century, Constantinople continued to retain much of its cosmopolitan vigor and cultural diversity despite the violence that sometimes followed the gradual dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. In an interview he gave years later, the director described the city as consisting of:

. . . many small streets with alluring variety shops, Turks and Greeks wearing fezzes, veiled Turkish women, Western Europeans, Levantine banks and stores, the sweets of Hajji Bekir, Armenian and Turkish pastry shops with loukoums, malembia, Viennese coffee and kataïfs. A blending of the Eastern and of the European in the immediate surroundings. Minarets from which muezzins, every evening, cried out their prayers at the top of their lungs while two-horse carriages paraded in the afternoons with ladies dressed in Paris. French flowers and Viennese salons with Arabic and Russian decorations, the Gylidizi on the Bosphorus, the paddle-wheel steamers going to the islands, Pringhipo and Chalki [islands] with its theological school where in 1919, swarms of fleeting Russian aristocrats disembarked, and finally, for us, the Greeks, the Baloukli [Greek Quarter] and Hagia Sophia.²

² Ibid., p. 107.

This rich blend of Anatolian, Byzantine and Western elements, so vividly described by Koun over half a century after leaving the city, was essential in the shaping of his imagination and aesthetic perceptions. It is reflected heavily in his work, particularly at the start of his career when, in his search for identity, he turned to Greek tradition for guidance and inspiration. It also provided him with an angle from which to approach and interpret ancient Greek drama which he saw as the product of a land and culture that had always stood at the crossroads between the East and the West.

Between 1920 and 1927, Koun attended the Rovertio, a private boarding school in Constantinople founded by American missionaries. The lessons were conducted in English and the curriculum followed American educational practices. In the Rovertio, he came into contact with a cross-section of students of different nationalities which he nostalgically described many years later as a "small society of nations" from which the students derived "through this wholesome fraternity, a common, social, intellectual and political consciousness".³ This common consciousness was to remain with Koun for the rest of his life and it was reflected not only in the scope and range of his work, but also in the objectivity of his approach derived from an enhanced perception and understanding of the world.

³Ibid., p. 108.

It was during his years at the Roverteio that Koun had his first taste of the theatre, acting in such school productions as Eugene O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon and Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Very little, however, is known of the extent of his dramatic activities there, making it difficult to determine the specific influence they may have had on his career other than that they strengthened his love for the theatre and imbued him with a strong desire to become an actor. Although this desire was eventually thwarted by economic factors, among others, his love for the theatre remained uncompromised.

By the time he graduated in 1927, he was fluent in English, less proficient in Greek and a stranger in the city where he had spent the first twenty years of his life. The 1920s were trying years for the Greeks living in Turkey. A disastrous war between Greece and Turkey in 1921-22 resulted in a humiliating defeat for the Greeks, a significant loss of territory for the country and a massacre of a large portion of the Greek population living in Turkey. The end of the hostilities was followed by a compulsory exchange of Moslem and Greek populations, supervised by the League of Nations, that brought a million and a half refugees to Greece. The historic significance of this war has been monumental for the Greeks:

The shattering defeat of the Greeks in Asia Minor in 1922, leading to the destruction of the ancient

cradles of Hellenic civilization in Ionia and the forcible displacement of one and a half million Greeks, who had to start life afresh as refugees in Greece, was an upheaval that left a lasting scar on the collective psyche of the nation. Out of the bitter disappointment and defeatism there arose a renewed quest for national self-awareness and self-affirmation. The return to the sources, the study of the most relevant and most recent forms of Greek popular culture and the discovery of folk artists--must be interpreted in relation to this historical circumstance and seen as products of the prevailing state of mind. The refugees from Asia Minor made a significant contribution to this movement: to them, tradition was a truth of life and a means of survival, because through tradition they were able to affirm their national identity. Uprooted and embittered, they clung to their traditional values with all the more determination.⁴

By 1927, practically all of Koun's family and friends had either repatriated or gone to live in other countries. There was nothing to keep him any longer in Constantinople, and by the end of that year he himself joined the exodus going first to Paris, where many of his relatives were now living, to study aesthetics at the Sorbonne.

Thwarted by the lack of funds again he was unable to complete his studies, and within a year he left France for Greece, settling permanently in Athens, where he lived and worked until the time of his death in 1987, at the age of seventy-nine. With his arrival in Athens, Koun entered the first phase of his theatrical career, a nine year period

⁴Marina Lambraki-Plaka, "Art and Ideology in Modern Greece: Some Thoughts on Greek Painting," trans. Timothy Cullen and Susan Kyriakides. ZYGOS Annual Edition on the Hellenic Fine Arts. Ed. Ion F. Frantzeskakis (Athens: Zygos Ltd., 1984), Vol. III, p.77.

that can be defined, in retrospect, as the formative years. This phase culminated in 1939 with his much acclaimed, professional production of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard.

Shortly after settling in Athens, Koun was offered a teaching position at the Kollegio Athinon, an American high school in Athens, where for the next nine years he taught English literature and language. As was the practice at the Rovertio when he was a student there, he used creative dramatics as part of his method for teaching English to the students:

. . . With the arrival of Karolos, the Kollegio found its Goethe and Koun his Weimar. Every week he would write a play and teach it to us. Most of them were adaptations of children's stories or English songs, with kings, witches and animals that talked. . . . Those performances we would present every Friday afternoon to the rest of the school with a lot of imagination and a lot of naughtiness.⁵

It was at the Kollegio, also, that Koun began directing his first full-scale productions, as it was the school's custom to stage a play at the end of each school year. He started, in the Spring of 1930, with R. D. Sherriff's realistic World War I drama, Journey's End, which he had seen done in 1929 by the prominent but short-lived Elefthera Skini (Free Stage) (1929-1930). The performance was in English and the actors chosen from the school's faculty. The play was a success and helped to establish him

⁵Alexis Solomos, "Kolegio Athinon, 1930-39, scholikes anamnisis" [school remembrances] in Karolos Koun, 25 chronia teatro [Karolos Koun 25 years of theatre]. Ed. Marios Ploritis (Athens: Teatro Technis, 1959), p. 10.

as the school's theatre director, thereby leading to the production of seven more plays during his tenure at the Kollegio. Unlike Journey's End they were performed in Greek and the roles assumed by students rather than teachers. They included, Aristophanes' The Birds, The Frogs and Plutus, Euripides' satyr play Cyclops, the seventeenth century anonymous Cretan comedy Stathis and Shakespeare's The Tempest and A Midsummer Night's Dream. Aesthetically, all the plays reflected a gradual but marked departure from the hackneyed theatrical realism and verisimilitude of common practice and an increasing focus towards new, nonrepresentational methods of production. In a more general sense they reflected the growing disaffection among many artists of the period with the boulevard theatre practices of the times which they viewed as a degeneration of nineteenth century realism.

Kostandinos Christomanos of the Nea Skini and Thomas Oikonomou of the Vasiliko Theatro are credited, among other things, for the introduction of realism into Greek theatre at the beginning of the century. Although their companies did not last very long, their influence endured, thanks primarily to their bequest to the Greek stage of the actresses Kyveli and Kotopouli, who with their own companies dominated the theatre, in the spirit of realism, well into the 1930s. During their theatrical reign

dramatic activity revolved around them and plays were written mostly for them or their companies.

The diverse theatrical movements that had sprung up in Western Europe as a reaction to realism had practically no effect on the Greek stage. Sporadic attempts in Greece, mostly in the 1920s, to modify realism to reflect contemporary views and attitudes were short-lived and had little or no lasting impact. If anything, they served as a reminder of the vacuum in modern Greek theatre, a vacuum that was to be partly filled by the creation of The Greek National Theatre in 1932, under the artistic guidance of Fotos Politis.

Politis, a Max Reinhardt disciple and a fervent admirer of German Expressionism, was an author and critic in addition to being a director. In the two and a half years that he directed for the National Theatre (1932-1934), he staged a total of thirty five plays. His eclectic approach helped set the company's pace for many years to come, and the success of his work earned him a prominent and permanent place in the history of modern Greek theatre. In an interview given in December, 1987 and published posthumously, Koun was asked what was the decisive factor that eventually led him to give up his teaching career and to redirect his amateur involvement in the theatre to a professional level:

Here is something that I haven't discussed very often and that's why many believe that I came to the

professional theatre directly from the amateur productions of the Kollegio, with Aristophanes and Shakespeare. . . . In the Spring of 1932, two years before the founding of the Laiki Skini with Devaris, I chanced to see the premier performance of the then newly established National Theatre with Aeschylus' Agamemnon directed by Fotos Politis. Although the production left me with many questions, it also swept me off my feet and for the first time I found myself spending many sleepless nights thinking whether I should devote myself completely to the theatre rather than divide myself between amateur productions and my teaching position at the Kollegio. I remained with this dilemma for a few more months until I found myself again at the National Theatre watching Fotos Politis' new productions of The Merchant of Venice, Danton's Death, John Gabriel Borkman, Othello and finally Oedipus Tyrannous which impressed me very deeply and turned me topsy-turvy. . . . These productions for me, at the age of twenty five and twenty six, remained unforgettable for many years. I still remember them now. . . . Yes, I believe that the enthusiasm that I felt then with the work of Fotos Politis at the National Theatre was the decisive factor that led me to devote myself immediately to the art of the theatre.⁶

Fotos Politis died unexpectedly on December 2, 1934, at the age of forty-four. He was succeeded by Demetrios Rondiris, another Reinhardt disciple and German expressionism enthusiast, whose controversial, German-influenced "baroque" productions are still a subject of discussion among critics and theatre historians. By the time of Politis's death, Koun, who had met him for the first time only a month earlier, was preparing his second production, outside the Kollegio, with his newly founded company, the Laiki Skini.

⁶Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies pp. 98-100.

The first three plays that Koun staged with the students, The Birds, The Frogs and Cyclops, were presented in a fairly standard and straightforward way revealing no intrinsic qualities characteristic of a new approach. However, an underlying search for an aesthetic guideline was at work and it began to surface by the time of his fourth production, the Cretan play Stathis:

. . . with his third [sic] production, however, the Cretan drama Stathis, at the end of 1933, begins to surface another approach, a folklore that was characteristically Greek. He had become associated at the time with Kondoglou and Tsarouchis and, with them, discovered the grace of the native folk element, of humor, of tradition. His Greek soul recognized her self and "memories" of the East, of Byzantium were awakened within her.⁷

This recognition of his "Greek soul" was basically an understanding of the strong link between art and tradition, the understanding that theatre, if it is to be considered an art form, could not acquire relevance or meaning for a given audience unless it reflected the symbols of that audience's tradition. Greek tradition, which Koun wholeheartedly embraced, was to be found not in the ranks of the industrialized and occidentalized middle and upper classes but in the life of the common people whose manners, customs and habits inclined more toward the East than the West. Their archetypes were to be found not in Western Europe but in Byzantium and Anatolia.

⁷Giannis Sideris, introduction to Karolos Koun, 25 chronia teatro, p. 7.

Fotis Kondoglou and Giannis Tsarouchis, mentioned in the above quote, are two painters who have exerted an immense influence on Greek art and the shaping of Greek culture in general this century. Kondoglou, the older of the two, was born in Asia Minor and came to live in Greece following the disaster of 1922. A deeply religious man, he shunned the theatre and had advised Tsarouchis on several occasions to give up his interest in it because "the theatre corrupts, it is an instrument of the devil."⁸ His most important contribution as a painter and writer to Greek art and letters was in the advancement of the literary and aesthetic values inherent in demoticism and traditional Greek folk and religious art, particularly as expressed in Byzantine iconography. For many Greek artists, it meant the reevaluation of their own neglected Hellenic heritage and the rediscovery of native sources of inspiration that could challenge the standards set by the aesthetics of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment with which many had tried to shape and dominate Greek culture to that point.

Koun himself has repeatedly testified to the influence that Kondoglou has had not only on him but on a whole generation of artists identified with the artistically fertile period of the twenties and thirties. In an interview he referred to him as having been "perhaps

⁸Giannis Tsarouchis, "Tha se thymamai panda san enan anthropo pou zei [I will always remember you as a man who lives], I Lexi 62 (February-March 1987): 97.

the most important teacher" he ever had and elsewhere as the man to whom he owed the gaining of his Greek identity. The early thirties, when Koun was discovering the wealth of his cultural heritage and launching his career in the theatre, were the peak of the painter's influence. For Koun they were times of great learning which he described as being "under the shadow of Fotis Kondoglou:"

That entire period was closely associated with the teacher Kondoglou and my first contact with Greek popular art and perhaps my first contact with the living Greek reality and tradition. As an artist I feel those years as being the most revealing for my art and my life.⁹

Tsarouchis, a co-founder of the Laiki Skini, was a pupil of Kondoglou and, in the early stages of his career, worked as his assistant helping him to copy Byzantine and post-Byzantine paintings. Although he broke from the master in the mid thirties because of artistic differences stemming from the limitations imposed by Kondoglou's fundamentalist approach to Greek art, the lessons he had learned imbued him with a strong sense for traditional and folk art forms. His work became a fusion of many styles, both Eastern and Western, but always retaining attributes that reveal a close affinity to Greek traditional and folk elements both in his subjects and his style. Another facet of his artistic development, unlike Kondoglou, was his work for the stage. It was in that respect that Tsarouchis

⁹Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, p. 52.

associated himself with Koun, in 1933, with the founding of the Laiki Skini. The fruit of that association was a lifelong collaboration between the two men during which numerous productions staged by Koun were designed by Tsarouchis.

With the production of Stathis, Koun's Hellenic aesthetic approach, borrowing from Greek tradition, also began to reveal expressionist qualities as his artistic objective became more and more the representation upon the stage of man as a reflection of the common people. This expressionism became increasingly more apparent with his subsequent productions, particularly in the plays staged with the Laiki Skini. Furthermore, it was a sign of his disaffection and rebellion against realism which had failed as a model to produce a healthy theatrical tradition and had deteriorated into a series of drab third-rate productions of boudoir comedies and drawing-room melodramas that strove to imitate European theatrical practices. Ten years later, in a retrospective look at his work during the thirties, Koun elaborated on the aesthetics that dominated the first years of his career which he redefined as Greek Popular Expressionism:

. . . the aesthetic principles that influenced me then were derived specifically from what is "Popular" Greek, the somewhat formative aspect of it as expressed in life, the genuine life of rural areas and the islands, our traditional folk songs and, going further back in time, Byzantine iconography and ancient vases. The plays presented, Erophili, Alcestis, Plutus, The Birds etc., reflected perfectly this spirit. I can say, to

use a more conventional term, that our theatre at the time was purely expressionistic. But a Greek type of expressionism, with Greek elements, taken both from the life and reality around us and from our tradition.¹⁰

As for the training of the actors, which Koun assumed himself both at the Kollegio and later at the Laiki Skini, new methods had to be explored to bring out the expressionist qualities that he sought. These methods deviated sharply from the declamatory, academic practices of the times which had their roots as far back as the nineteenth century, when German aesthetics and bourgeois attitudes were used as models upon which to build modern Greek culture:

Naturally, to create an authentic Greek expressionist theatre, I sought to instruct my actors in the ways of the peasant classes, where one could still find a wealth of expressions, of movements, of sensibilities and of a spiritual world. In other words, I began by taking as my basis the Greek popular reality with all its rich, naive and flowing elements. Setting aside my own intellectual and spiritual needs, I thought that I should expose myself to an authentic expression of life, the most intense that I could find. And this one, I suppose, I felt as such, being more familiar to me in its beauty, its simplicity, its naivete and above all its plastic qualities expressed in bold lines. The movements, the postures, the speech, they all had meaning and rose from a true spiritual condition and need which was not, of course, intellectual but at the same time without affectations or limitations and without the restrictions of good manners that have such an anesthetic effect on any form of plasticity in other classes. Hunger was hunger, thirst was thirst and pain was intense and real, imprinted without pretense on the flesh, the muscles and the nerves. Naive sensibilities, but at least authentic, real and so intensely alive.¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹Ibid., p. 23-24.

Realism was not, of course, the only thing troubling the theatre at the time but a whole range of problems. With the exception of the National Theatre and the continuing work of the star actresses Kyveli and Kotopouli with their respective companies, little else of merit was seen in Greek theatres. The misfortunes ailing the Greek stage remained quite similar in the thirties to the way they were described by the founders of the Elefthera Skini in 1929 and were precisely what Koun fought all his life to correct and remedy, first with the Laiki Skini and then with the Theatro Technis:

. . . The symptoms of the ill are the haphazard repertory, the offhanded stagings, the absence of serious and mature instruction, in a word: the lack of a profound and solid perception of the art of the theatre and of a clear method to put into its service. In today's theatre, none of these things are put into order by a concern, for an artistic realization of dramatic forms requiring artistic wholes. Its [theatre's] only concern being how to best serve and show off the leading parts.¹²

When Koun turned to folk art and the common people for inspiration, it was because he saw in their tradition and folklore the source from which to derive this "profound and solid perception of the art of the theatre." Although the Greeks had been robbed of their histrionic instinct for centuries, the raw material from which to revive it still existed. Efforts to pump it with European blood helped to

¹²Lygizos, To Neoelliniko plai sto pangosmio teatro, 2:427.

an extent by creating the craftsmen. But they did not succeed in creating an indigenous Greek theatre. That did not happen until after World War II when a new generation of playwrights emerged that was able to redefine Hellenism or Greekness, not in terms of the past or with the aid of foreign influences but in terms of the present existential reality and human condition of the contemporary Greek. Koun was certainly moving in that direction, however, at the beginning of his career, when he chose to derive the formal aspects of his aesthetic approach from the rich raw material in Greek tradition. It provided him with a firm basis for his work, a clear-cut focus and a definite sense of direction. His initiation into the theatre through tradition provided him with a solid background and gave him the strength and vision which enabled him, years later, to play an important role in the identification, promotion and establishment of the aforementioned post-World War II generation of Greek playwrights.

The success of Koun's first productions with the students of the Kollegio helped establish his reputation as a promising and innovative director and admitted him into an important artistic circle that included the painters Kondoglou and Tsarouchis. One admirer, the journalist and critic Dionysios Devaris, who had seen Koun's productions of the Birds and the Frogs with the students, was so impressed by his work that he proposed to him to create

together "an artistic association that would establish itself as an artistic presence in the country's total theatrical activity"¹³. In other words, the creation of an art theatre, a company that would be the workshop of this new Hellenic aesthetic approach. The result was the founding of the Laiki Skini (Popular or Folk Theatre), together with the painter Giannis Tsarouchis, in the Winter of 1933.

Devaris's interest in the theatre was not incidental. He was a seasoned man of the theatre, having been an actor in Christomanos' Nea Skini and having collaborated in 1910 with Raymond and Penelope Duncan in a production of Sophocles' Electra, while studying English philology at Harvard. That production was highly acclaimed at the time and was seen in many cities around the United States as well as in Paris in such theatres as Chatelet and Trocadero. Furthermore, Devaris had been a director and a playwright with several of his plays produced in his lifetime.¹⁴

The Laiki Skini was thus founded by Koun, Devaris and Tsarouchis in the Winter of 1933 and consisted of an acting school in addition to the company. About two hundred people responded to an audition notice in a newspaper and

¹³Ach. Mamakis, "O Karolos Koun omilei" [Karolos Koun speaks]. Eikones (n.d): n.p.

¹⁴Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp. 15-21.

following rigorous examinations ten students were chosen. In order to adhere to their aim of a theatre influenced by traditional elements found in the country's common people, the actors were chosen amidst the working class in the hope that by doing so they would best succeed in representing Greek types on stage rather than European equivalents. The candidates were all young and inexperienced. The acting school was housed in the old Municipal Theatre, which in its heyday had welcomed such leading ladies as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse, but had been dark and unused for many years and has subsequently been torn down.

The training of the actors lasted seven months before the company had its first production. At first they worked on several plays exploring various ways of expressing the naive folk sensibilities that Koun was seeking; soon after they concentrated on the Cretan Renaissance tragedy Erophili, by Georgios Kornaros. After months of rigorous work the play was finally presented on the 20th of April, 1934, directed by Koun and with sets and costumes designed by Tsarouchis. In the play's program, a brief statement signed by the company's founders expressing their aims became the Laiki Skini's first declaration of purpose:

We believe that every community of people can create and produce provided it feels itself rooted in tradition. It was with this thought that we founded the Laiki Skini. . . . We will offer something that may seem poor on the outside because we took into account the inner wealth of the plays and the manner

this wealth can best be expressed and, with simple means, touch our soul which has been led astray by bad foreign imitations.

The theatre is an art complete in itself which is judged according to the laws of art and not according to how successfully or not it imitates life.¹⁵

Although not very explicit, this brief declaration established some of the company's principles, the most important of which was its dependence on tradition as its foundation and source of inspiration. Even if the final outcome, stripped of all extraneous elements, seemed poor, it was of tantamount importance for the company to maintain its dependence on tradition until the seed planted in its fertile soil would grow and develop into an indigenous Greek theatre. Furthermore, the declaration established the position of the company's founders towards the prevailing realism in contemporary Greek drama which they did not consider essential to dramatic expression nor an intrinsic reflection of Greek popular and traditional art. The simplicity of means refers presumably to their attempt at freeing themselves from foreign influences in order to return to the roots and begin afresh with what was immediately available to them in popular art and folk sensibilities. A slightly more detailed declaration of purpose was made in the program of the Laiki Skini's following production.

¹⁵ "Koun 50 chronia theatro" [Koun 50 years of theatre], Ethnos, 23 February 1987, p. 22.

Erophili was written around the beginning of the seventeenth century, in a poetic mode and with a dramatic structure, style and content directly influenced by the theatre of the Italian Renaissance. A long and difficult play to stage, it provided its director with an interpretive challenge in his effort to make it meaningful and relevant to an audience distanced from it by more than just time. The result was a production where all disparate elements were transformed and brought together through the use of Greek traditional and folk art as the play's metaphor. Furthermore, Erophili was a Greek drama, written in an understandable demotic idiom that had its place in the history of the (albeit fractured) post-Byzantine Greek theatre and thus lent itself perfectly to the endeavor of extracting from Greek native sources the basis upon which to build a modern theatrical tradition.

Tsarouchis' set design made no attempt at a realistic three dimensional representation. Painted flats in bold, bright colors and simple lines were used to represent the royal locale of the play's action. Detail was kept at a minimum and the style was reminiscent of naive paintings and inspired to a great extent by the Karagiozis shadow theatre. The costumes were influenced by Byzantine paintings and Greek folk costumes and the actors were made up to resemble traditional Greek types. As for the acting, a conscious effort was made by the director and

the actors to break away from the conventional declamatory practices of contemporary professionals and move towards greater subtlety and truth, searching for the reality of their character amidst country types and the common people. One of the actors in the play, Lykourgos Kallergis, who collaborated numerous times with Koun in subsequent productions and became a lifelong friend recalled, in a series of newspaper articles on Koun published shortly after his death, the triumphant reception the Laiki Skini' received with its production of Erophili:

The first appearance of the Laiki Skini was startling and inspiring. It was an outstanding artistic event for conditions in Athens at the time, but also a station in the development of Greek theatre.

The intellectual community attending the performance--poets, writers, men of the theatre (among them Aggelos Sikelianos) were deeply moved and did not hide their admiration.

With the end of the performance they broke into a wild applause and immediately afterwards the public jumped on the stage to salute the director and the actors and to express its enthusiasm.

Sikelianos, tempestuous and very excited, was hugging and kissing everyone. It was unprecedented. The critics of the time described the production of Erophili as a "brave and worthy attempt, whose contribution to the history of dramatic art could be extremely significant."¹⁶

Tsarouchis, however, recalled the premier performance of the Laiki Skini slightly differently. Although he acknowledged the artistic success of the play among the intellectual and artistic circle attending the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

performance, he remembered the general public as being less than enthusiastic:

The general public did not understand anything; the university students were laughing and throwing paper planes made out of the program. . . . A few select people, however, did understand what had happened and what was going to happen in the future and disregarded the exterior simplicity and primitiveness which frightened and displeased the uninformed public.¹⁷

Erophili was followed several months later by Euripides' Alcestis. Encouraged by the artistic success of his first production, Koun proceeded with more confidence in applying his new aesthetic of the theatre. This time, however, he was dealing with Greek tragedy, his first attempt at it, and, a touchy subject for the purists who, consciously or not, denied the cultural validity of a Greek artistic aesthetic derived from the "corrupt" folk and traditional art of the post-Byzantine era.

The set and costumes were designed by the painter Diamantis Diamantopoulos, another Kondoglou pupil, who replaced Tsarouchis. The latter was going through an artistic crisis at the time, which culminated with his break from the Kondoglou circle earlier that year and his departure for Paris a year later in search of new ideas to inspire and guide his artistic development. It would be some time before Koun and Tsarouchis would collaborate professionally again.

¹⁷Giannis Tsarouchis, "Epistrofi sto Romeico" [Return to Greekness] in Karolos Koun, 25 chronia teatro, p. 16.

The expressionistic elements applied in Alcestis were more obvious and intense than in the previous production of the Laiki Skini. The set was again a simple design with bold curving outlines, overlapping planes and a distorted perspective that defied realism. Once again the Karagiozis shadow theatre was a prominent influence, particularly in the set's form and arrangement. In the program, the company's founders reiterated, although a bit more succinctly this time, the goals of the Laiki Skini and proclaimed their disinterest in an erudite approach to the play. This was bound to incense many of the purists who felt it was their obligation and duty to protect ancient Greek drama from indecorous productions:

Our goal is to create a theatre based on Greek tradition. By that we don't mean to say that we can avoid every foreign influence. We will seek, however, to work with materials from our land, taken, first and foremost, from the medieval [sic] Cretan theatre, which is closer to us, the Karagiozis shadow theatre which, as much as it has been ignored, is a very rich source, from other representative art forms--dances, folk painting, songs and music--and from the poetry of our land. Along with these we will be guided by the customs and types that one still finds in Greece as symbols of the life and soul of our times. With these symbols, many of which have endured from antiquity to the present, we will also approach ancient Greek tragedy.

By study alone and cold knowledge we would have fooled each other and offered nothing. Much has been written and said about ancient theatre. Countless books and studies. In our production of Alcestis, we relied on none of them. We felt the work, we translated it into modern Greek ourselves (translators of the play: K. Koun, L. Kallergis, Th. Spanoudis) and tried to render with our means, means that are alive in

our souls, the rhythm, the simplicity and the beauty of ancient tragedy.¹⁸

Alcestis received a variety of reactions ranging from those who thought it was another historic achievement for modern Greek theatre to those who felt it desecrated ancient Greek drama. Whatever the case, the production did deviate from the norm by shedding the pomposity and doctrinairism of accepted practice. It approached the play through simple means that aimed at the sensibilities and tastes of the common Greek but without denigrating the dramatic and literary importance of the play. To the purists, however, those means which endeavored to redefine Greekness through Byzantine and post-Byzantine traditional folk influences were anathema and a contradiction of terms when applied to ancient Greek drama.

The dispute for the right or wrong way to stage classical theatre has been an ongoing and sometimes violently passionate concern for the Greeks this century. Thirty years earlier four university students had been killed in a riot while protesting the staging of the Oresteia by the Vasiliko Teatro which they had erroneously assumed to have been translated into demotic Greek. Even today there are some who would cringe at the notion of anyone approaching ancient Greek drama with less than ecclesiastical reverence. Koun responded to the diatribes

¹⁸ "Koun 50 chronia teatro" [Koun 50 years of theatre], Ethnos 23 February 1987, p. 23.

written by some of his critics about the unorthodox staging of Alcestis with a letter to a newspaper:

Only by distancing ourselves from philological and scholarly "conditions" will we be able to approach the spirit of antiquity, to feel and deliver truths that don't wear out with time or place and which remain always alive in the soul of a human being. As to how much the Laiki Skini touched those truths by the way it presented Euripides' play, I never expected many to understand.¹⁹

The Laiki Skini produced altogether five plays before it folded for economic reasons, as so many other companies had done before it. After Alcestis Koun staged Aristophanes' Plutus, Molière's The Imaginary Invalid and, finally, in the Summer of 1936, Gogol's The Marriage. All the plays were artistic successes by most accounts, but that was not sufficient to avert the economic woes besieging the company and shortly after the summer of 1936, the Laiki Skini disbanded.

1936 was also a year of political significance for Greece. That year the Greek government succumbed to the fascist mood of the continent and its leadership came under the authority of a military junta headed by General Giannis Metaxas which lasted until Greece's surrender to the German onslaught in 1941. As expected, theatrical activity during the Metaxas dictatorship became subject to strict government scrutiny. Censorship was rampant and went as far as banning productions of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound

¹⁹Ibid., p. 23.

and Sophocles' Antigone because of their anti-authoritarian themes. With the advent of the dictatorship, the socio-political climate of the late twenties and early thirties which created fertile conditions for the resurgence of creativity in the arts, took a sudden turn for the worse, particularly where the theatre was concerned. This condition was further aggravated by the havoc and devastation unleashed four years later by the war that engulfed the entire continent.

Following the closing of the Laiki Skini, Koun continued to teach and direct at the Kollegio for three more years where he further developed and applied his Greek expressionist aesthetic. At the same time, however, he was being exposed to various contemporary international artistic trends and ideas that exerted an unavoidable influence on his artistic growth and development. They led him towards a theatre of greater psychological depth and intensity, as reflected in the dramas of the Ibsen and Chekhov tradition and as expressed, primarily, in the writings of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Yevgeny Vakhtangov which Koun had recently discovered and which played a major role, at the time, in refocusing his attention and interests.

As his theatrical knowledge and experience grew and his position in the theatre became increasingly more secure, Koun began to sense that his Greek Popular Expressionism,

which had served him so well at the onset of his career by providing him a definite starting point and a clear-cut sense of direction, was not an end in itself. Eventually he realized, as Tsarouchis had a few years earlier with painting, that the folk aesthetic would stifle his artistic development if pursued purely as an end. This, of course, is true of all perceptions and beliefs when pursued with a fundamentalist conviction, and is not strictly limited to Koun's native brand of expressionism.

Growth and development imply, by their very natures, assimilation, recognition and, inevitably, renunciation and denial. As Koun's awareness of the vast range of possibilities in the theatre grew so did his realization that artistically and intellectually he was outgrowing the aesthetic guidelines that dominated his work at the Kollegio and the Laiki Skini. The inevitable break from them was forthcoming, a gradual and difficult break to make, as he later confided, but one which was unavoidable in the frantic pace of modern times:

Many times I sensed in myself a great danger, a feeling that I was making an effort not to allow something deeper within me to awaken and that I was not being honest. As time went by I began to look for ways to escape, logically and consciously, from the cage I had trapped myself in. In time, I understood that what I had loved was not an end, that there was a door that opened further down and, of course, behind that door would be another door and so on and so on.

It was a necessary journey for my soul in order for it to acquire certain ingredients that it lacked. Often our complex spiritual mechanism functions blindly and leads us unconsciously to absorb from the outside world those things which we lack so we can understand

more and more things. It leads us for the moment to believe in endings, in absolutes, so that it can chew easily and voraciously and then, satisfied, move further on.²⁰

By 1939, Koun had absorbed and assimilated all that was necessary of the outside world from a traditional, folk perspective to make his work in the theatre firmly rooted on Greek soil. However, the aesthetics derived from tradition, their genuine and unpretentious character notwithstanding, were too naive and perhaps even irrelevant in view of the state of the world on the eve of the Second World War. It was no longer possible to ignore what was happening on the international scene, politically and culturally, in order to concentrate on local color and flavor. For Koun it was a time of transition, a time to move on, a time to seek new ways to hold "the mirror up to nature."

It is during times of transition that artists must prove their true mettle and Koun was no exception. Two doors were opened for him that year that enabled him to evolve and develop artistically, the first as a result of his much acclaimed production of The Cherry Orchard, in January of 1939, at the Greek Odeon, which marked the end of his amateur involvement in the theatre and the beginning of a three-year phase where he sought his fortune in the commercial theatre. The second door was opened when he

²⁰Ploritis, ed. Karolos Koun gia to teatro, p. 25.

resigned his post at the Kollegio, a few months later, in order to devote all his time to the theatre.

The production of The Cherry Orchard was, in many ways, a test for Koun before moving to the arena of professional theatre following his nine year apprenticeship at the Kollegio and the Laiki Skini. The results, to no one's surprise, were triumphant. The huge success of the play firmly established his reputation on a professional level and marked the start of a three year involvement with commercial theatre that ended with the founding of the Theatro Technis in 1942.

The actors for The Cherry Orchard were chosen among former members of the Laiki Skini such as Lykourgos Kallergis and Pandelis Zervos as well as professionals like Antonis Giannidis, who was borrowed from the Kotopouli Company and who is still remembered today for his outstanding portrayal of Firs. The future set designer Giannis Stephanelis, who subsequently worked with Koun on numerous occasions with the Theatro Technis, attended a dress rehearsal of the play and remembered the production as being one of the two major influences that led to his infatuation with the theatre:

What I saw, literally bewitched me. I cannot judge it now, but what I felt then was so different from what I had already known in the theatre. And even with good theatre in the shape of a Fotos Politis, of a Marika Kotopouli. Koun's work had something very familiar about it. Something which, without exciting you abruptly and intensely, stirred you up deeper within your soul and conquered you. I believe there were two

occasions in my life that made me love the theatre. My first contact with the work of Fotos Politis and his illustrious protagonists and this general dress rehearsal of The Cherry Orchard.²¹

Shortly after The Cherry Orchard, Koun was commissioned by Katerina, a young actress who had risen to great prominence in the 1930s, to direct her in Hedda Gabler. The play was staged in March of that year, was critically acclaimed and its success brought more attention to the young director and further consolidated his reputation. Next followed another commission, this time from the first lady of the Greek stage, Marika Kotopouli who, after seeing Hedda Gabler, signed him up to direct a series of plays for her own company. She also allowed him to use actors from the defunct Laiki Skini. That collaboration lasted for two full seasons (1939-40 and 1940-41) during which Koun staged twelve plays. Kotopouli, who was gradually retiring from the stage, acted only in one of them, Euripides' Electra, but her presence was strongly felt in all the productions. At the end of the second season Koun came back to Katerina and directed her in three more plays.

But Koun's soul was not in the commercial theatre. His love and devotion to his muse was far too spiritual to tolerate the petty competitions and power-plays that went behind the scenes of the professional circuit. He regarded

²¹Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, p. 23.

the theatre as art and, as in all art, he attached to it a purpose of a spiritual and educational nature. He saw it as a mission, whose principal objective was the spiritual elevation and the intellectual enlightenment of every one exposed to it regardless of which side of the foot-lights they were on. This mission required rigorous training and discipline as well as absolute faith, dedication and sacrifice, particularly on the side of the actors, in order to achieve the organic unity, the spiritual and aesthetic wholeness that would lead it towards its objective. The politics of the business-oriented commercial theatre and the self-seeking schemes of its actors, whose only ambition was stardom and profit, were incongruous to his artistic convictions and to the importance and purpose he assigned to the theatre as art:

. . . Art is great. We will approach her with devotion and respect. We have no right to bring her down to our level. This tendency, especially in the theatre, is extremely common. . . . As a whole, the theatre, and I say that with a great deal of pain. . . is standing on rotting foundations. All of us who work in it know that more or less. As it exists today, it is not art, it does not strive to elevate the intellectual level of our people, it does not ceaselessly pursue a greater spiritual enlightenment of more and more people. The theatre, as we know it, is simply engaged in an effort to please and to create what is commonly known as "commercial successes." This effort is accomplished in an asphyxiating, behind-the-scenes atmosphere, while the competition for dominance between actors and businessmen, who are in a constant conflict with each other, persists. . . . And what about Art? What about the goal of the artist? How can we possibly lift our heads when we are possessed by such prima donna attitudes and such human mediocrity. What about the public? We flatter it with the plays we write, we

flatter it with our acting, we cater to its basest tastes and we put it to sleep.²²

Those harsh words were spoken in 1943, shortly after the creation of the Theatro Technis and, at the time, were well deserved. They reflected Koun's distrust of the commercial theatre which he also associated, with the exception perhaps of the National Theatre, with all professional theatre. Even later in his career, when theatrical conditions had significantly improved, he remained very aloof of the commercial rewards offered by the professional theatre and held-on faithfully to his artistic values and convictions. Even at the height of his artistic success he never failed himself for the sake of a commercial success although, inadvertently, he had quite a few. It is this kind of artistic and moral integrity that has characterized the man and earned him the deep abiding respect that he received from every one.

In his three year experience with the commercial theatre, prior to the founding of the Theatro Technis, Koun was fortunate to have worked with two of the best professional companies of the time and with some of the finest actors of the period. In spite of that, however, he was dissatisfied with the nature and quality of his work. The inadequacy of the professional theatre to express itself as a collaborative unity betrayed his artistic

²²Ploritis, ed. Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 16-17.

objectives and failed to fulfill him as an artist. It left him no recourse but to explore other means by which to fulfill his own artistic needs:

. . . I didn't like the professional theatre. Basically I like it as theatre, of course, but I don't like its professional side. There doesn't exist a sense of collaboration, of contact that would liberate you, and a more spiritual goal. I believe that you only serve yourself, the prima donnas and the star system. And that did not interest me at all. That's why at the same time that I was directing I began the preliminary work for something different.²³

That preliminary work was, in essence, keeping alive the fundamental principles and needs that led to the creation of the Laiki Skini in 1933. Those principles and needs were for the establishment of a company that would approach the theatre not as a commercial enterprise where every one was concerned only about their own personal needs but as an art form where all the elements of production would coalesce into an artistic synthesis and produce an organic whole. Furthermore the Laiki Skini was conceived as a counterbalance to the Realism that had dominated Greek theatre since the turn of the century.

Koun still held very strongly to his conviction of the purpose of art and so of the theatre being not the photographic representation of life but its interpretation through the artist's complex spiritual and intellectual awareness. What he envisioned for the future, however, was

²³"To Kekinima kai i poreia tou Theatrou Technis" [The beginning and the direction of the Theatro Technis], Ellinikos Vorras, 2 September 1979, no page number.

not the continuation of the restrictive aesthetic line of his Greek Popular Expressionism. That aesthetic approach had been a most important tool in the fight against Realism and in his search for an authentic Greek medium of dramatic expression back then, but it was now becoming obsolete in view of the times. A new aesthetic was needed that would modify the old one by taking into account present day needs and realities and eventually completely assimilate it. It would be a natural, organic development resulting from the intellectual and psychological demands made by the unavoidable reality of contemporary social and political conditions.

If the artistically revealing years with the Laiki Skini and the Kollegio are characterized as Koun's formative years, his three-year's work in the professional theatre can be seen as his internship prior to venturing into what became the magnum opus of his career, the creation of the Theatro Technis (Art Theatre). By 1942 he had come of age and, as grim as life was under the German occupation and the savage and devastating war that raged all over Europe, he gathered old colleagues together, many going back to his days with the Laiki Skini, and launched the major project of his life.

CHAPTER III

1942-1950: THE FIRST PHASE OF THE THEATRO TECHNIS
FROM THE COMPANY'S INCEPTION DURING THE
GERMAN OCCUPATION TO ITS DISSOLUTION
FOLLOWING THE GREEK CIVIL WAR

The decade of the forties did not spare the Greeks the devastation and carnage spread throughout Europe by the war that engulfed the continent. On April 6, 1941 the armies of the Third Reich launched their invasion of Greece, and within six weeks the country was completely overrun by the invaders. The occupation lasted three and a half years and ended with the withdrawal of the German forces from the Greek mainland in October, 1944. As the German troops were pulling out, however, they left behind them an open wound which was to fester into a bitter internecine feud between the political left and right that prolonged the suffering of the Greeks for five more years. This tragedy of fratricidal bloodshed and slaughter, for which both sides were responsible, has left the deepest scars in the psyche of the Greeks in modern times.

The first year of the German occupation was the harshest and most difficult, as the malignancy of the war was further intensified by an appalling famine that claimed thousands of lives, particularly around the capital. Athens, having become a large and overpopulated urban center over the years, absorbing one third of the country's population, depended almost entirely on imported food. The famine was the result of both a naval blockade by the British, who failed to foresee the consequences of such a military maneuver, and of Nazi Germany's insensitivity and indifference to human suffering. The enormous death toll suffered as a result of the famine, coupled with the extensive reprisals taken by the Germans against any act of resistance, made the winter of 1941-42 a time of unforgettable agony. To make matters worse, nature could not have been more unkind to the Greeks that year. As the winter months rolled in, they brought with them snow and some of the coldest temperatures in memory. It seemed as though the elements had joined with the worst of human nature to provide the maximum of suffering.

Ironically, it was under such devastating human conditions that the seeds for the creation of the Theatro Technis were planted. In the summer of 1941, after having worked two full seasons in the professional circuit with the Kotopouli company, Koun, disillusioned by the artistic impoverishment of the professional theatre, returned, once

more, to the actress Katerina, bringing with him some of his closest associates. Katerina, a star of the highest rank, was formerly with the Greek National Theatre which she had left a few years earlier to form her own company and seek an independent career. Although very much a star in the professional and commercial theatre that Koun had grown to dislike so much, she was an exception and he took great pleasure in working with her. The professional dedication and artistic integrity of both artists earned them their mutual admiration and respect and brought them back together on several occasions after the war, at times when the Theatro Technis, for one reason or another, had temporarily stopped operating.

Koun's collaboration with Katerina in the 1941-42 season, resulted in four productions, some of which were mounted during the worst of that terrible winter. In spite of the difficult conditions under which they were staged, the productions received wide critical acclaim and further confirmed his reputation as a master director. The contrast between the severity of the conditions and the pleasure of being in a great play directed by a gifted and innovative director, was recalled, years later, by Lykourgos Kallergis, who had been with Koun since the founding of the Laiki Skini. The play was Ibsen's A Doll's House, the last play of the season and the last work Koun would direct before

embarking into the crowning achievement of his career, the
Theatro Technis:

I played the ailing Dr. Rank. I remember the theatre being without heat. Before the performance, we all walked back and forth backstage shivering, and the only sound coming from our mouths was "I'm hungry, I'm cold!" The same sound and the same painful longing was shared by most of the people in the audience. The moment the performance began, however, everything was forgotten. We came on stage and played our parts with verve and inspiration, in that beautiful play by Ibsen, and the public, forgetting cold and hunger, watched and enjoyed the excellent production staged by Karolos Koun.¹

In spite of his strong admiration for Katerina, it had become quite obvious to Koun by now that his heart was not with the professional and commercial theatre. He neither felt a part of it, nor enjoyed its working environment which was almost always conducive to a bourgeois, star-oriented theatre. He had been contemplating a break from this type of theatre for quite a while and it was only a matter of time now before he would be ready to give it up and return once again to something more attuned to his artistic convictions. He longed for a theatre with defined artistic responsibilities and a clear-cut social purpose, a theatre whose principal objective would be the public's cultural cultivation and enrichment, its intellectual advancement and its overall betterment through the finest possible representation of

¹Lykourgos Kallergis, Ethnos 23 February 1987, p. 23.

theatrical art. He yearned for a return to the working atmosphere he had known with the Laiki Skini and the Kollegeio Athinon where he was free to explore and where the creative process was neither geared towards commercial success nor depended on the whims and caprices of a star actor, but was rather in the service of a collective artistic effort whose goal was the establishment of a superior theatrical tradition:

Naturally, this successful service in the commercial theatre, with its ambitious protagonists, the prima donnas and the holy monsters of the stage and screen, never brought him satisfaction. He felt awkward and uncomfortable. There was no communication for him. He felt cut off from the real function of the theatre and subjected to a sterile professionalism and a routine livelihood. He yearned for fresh air, for the creative collaboration with simple and guileless people, the unspoiled children of the land. This city dweller could communicate only with the genuine soul of the common people. He saw the theatre as a social function which he could only serve, literally, as an amateur.

Thus, he began once again to search for a theatre with a mission, where all its participants would speak the same language, communicate with each other and work for the same goal: the regeneration of the people through the art of the theatre. The theatre itself was to constitute a fortress of resistance against the conqueror, against the consequences of the occupation and prepare the people to fight for their freedom and, in the long run, for the building of a better life in our land. All these things were the prelude to the founding of the Theatro Technis.²

Although the occupation, the famine and the severity of that winter had significantly curtailed theatrical activities, they had not managed to eliminate them completely. There were still some theatres that were able

²Ibid., p. 23.

to continue functioning and to perpetuate both the boulevard tradition and the relatively new farsokomodeia [farce-comedy] genre which had appeared for the first time in the early thirties and had become very popular by the end of the decade. By now, however, these theatrical manifestations had dwindled to less than third rate productions, devoid of any substance to make them rise above cheap sentiment or the most pedestrian humor. To those who wished the theatre to come into its own as an art form, with achievements comparable and worthy of those in modern Greek poetry and prose, they were the sad reminder of the perennial vacuum in Greek theatre which, because of the war, had become even more conspicuous. There was, of course, the Greek National Theatre, as the only stage from which one could expect something beyond the prosaic and the mundane.

This vacuum in the Greek theatre had existed for a long time. Greece had had its theatrical tradition severed by four hundred years of Ottoman rule. Any attempt to reconnect with it, following independence, would have had to take into account the many cultural changes undergone by the Greeks during those four centuries. To assume a resumption of theatrical activities from the standpoint of contemporary Western European practices was a miscalculation and the most serious error in judgement made by efforts at a renaissance of Greek drama in modern times.

Early attempts at filling the vacuum--such as the Nea Skini and the Vasiliko Theatro, at the beginning of the century--were notable but short-lived precisely because they fell prey to that error. The problem was not with the sincerity of the attempts or the theatrical knowledge and skill of the men behind them but a combination of a country's stifled dramatic sensibilities and the inability of the innovators to envision a theatre that would go beyond the fulfillment of a select few. The few, of course, were those who wished to be identified strictly as Western Europeans and rejected any notion of a cultural link between the modern Greek and his immediate neighbors. Thus, as noble and lofty as the aims of those early innovators were, they failed to generate a genuine theatrical tradition in modern Greece because they failed to understand or accept the complete cultural makeup of their own people. An all-embracing theatrical effort entailed a consideration of the cultural needs of all Greeks and not just those who saw themselves strictly as Western Europeans.

In the 1920s and early thirties, during a period of relative artistic freedom and experimentation, there was significant activity in trying to bridge the cultural gap. One of the most important of those efforts was the movement associated with the painter and writer Fotis Kondoglou who was one of the first to focus attention on the wealth inherent in Greek tradition and folk art and their capacity

to serve as a source of inspiration to young artists. Koun's work, during that period, reflected that movement's influence, particularly in his efforts at creating a Greek expressionist theatre inspired by popular motifs. The founding of the Greek National Theatre in 1932 was also in keeping with the cultural revitalization efforts of those years, although its interests leaned more towards a theatre along the Western European lines.

The creative drive of the twenties and thirties came to a standstill with the advent of the Metaxas dictatorship in 1936. As Greece joined the fascist sweep across Europe with widespread political suppression, censorship and artistic restriction, the Greek theatre, with only a few exceptions, quickly reverted to the kind of mindless entertainment and diversion that had been its mainstay throughout most of its modern history. The cultural vacuum revealed itself triumphantly once again, and the boulevard theatre reasserted its unchallenged dominance of the stage.

Koun's "popular expressionism," in the 1930s, with its bold stylizations and its concentration on the folkloric, the primitive and the naive, was a genuine effort at creating an indigenous Greek theatrical expression. It deeply characterized his work during that early period of his career but more importantly it attuned him to Greek tradition and folk art which helped him establish a solid foundation upon which to grow and develop.

As eager as he was by the summer of 1941, however, to regain his artistic freedom and become an "amateur" once again, he was also not interested in resuming where he had left off. As an artist, he had grown in the intervening years and his aesthetic perceptions had evolved significantly. The artistic and intellectual nourishment acquired during his years with the Laiki Skini and the Kollegeio was fundamental to his aesthetic expression and would remain with him throughout his life. It would reflect very strongly in his work, particularly in his interpretation and staging of ancient Greek drama. But an unhampered artistic development demanded that the aesthetic perceptions acquired in the course of time be assimilated by the creative imagination and not treated as a definitive and inflexible artistic approach.

In the fast-paced, kaleidoscopic times of the twentieth century Koun could not remain blind to the many artistic trends and currents that criss-crossed on the international scene. Eventually he realized that the aesthetic principles of "popular expressionism" must be recognized not as a set of definitive and inflexible rules but as a link in the never ending chain of artistic growth and development, otherwise they would ultimately defeat their purpose and have a stagnating effect on art and artist alike. The Laiki Skini and the Kollegeio were a necessary crossing in Koun's artistic journey. Now, however, the

lessons learned from that experience had to be incorporated into the treatment of what he had come to regard as the most vital component of contemporary theatre, psychological drama:

I am very happy and bless what motivated me to grapple with this naive poetry and its form-giving expression. Greek popular expressionism was a great teacher and if nothing else it helped me cultivate the sense and need for plasticity in the theatre, not the manufactured plasticity, of course, as taught in certain dance and ballet schools, but the fluid plasticity as it manifests itself in life, the mountains, the ravines, the trees, the animals, the birds and in human beings. . . .

. . . That was in 1933. Ten years have passed since and it would be a lie for me to say that the things revealed to me at the time, cultivated and better assimilated within me now, don't influence the form of my present work. However, now we do Ibsen, Shaw, Pirandello. We are concerned primarily with psychological drama which has very little in common with the more naive forms of the theatre. When we acted then, we used tones, now we use undertones. We displayed solid, whole and primitive emotions. Today we try to offer the countless psychological nuances of the cultivated modern human being. Life demands it; contemporary reality, the airplanes, the machines, the books, the rhythm of progress around us, the rhythm of progress within us. Any attempt to make naive art today would be. . . an anachronism approaching mannerism. It is like voluntarily deadening three fourths of one's self in order to cultivate the other fourth.³

While Koun was working in the professional/commercial theatre during that interim period between the Laiki Skini and the Theatro Technis, he was also searching for the new artistic means that would answer the demands made by "contemporary reality" and the challenges posed by its quintessential dramatic expression:

³Floritis, ed., Karolos Koun Gia to Theatro, pp. 24-25.

"psychological drama." The breakthrough in his search came with his discovery of the Russian innovators of pre "Socialist Realism" days, whose influence, by the 1930s, had spread beyond the Soviet Union into Europe and the United States.

He was inspired, primarily, by Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov and Tairov and by the extraordinary achievements of the Moscow Art Theatre which had been at the forefront of Russian theatrical creativity and innovation during the first decades of the twentieth century. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Koun founded his own theatro technis (which in English translates into "art theatre"), he christened it after that time-honored institution co-founded by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1898.

With renewed enthusiasm Koun immersed himself in learning all about that period in Russian theatre. He obtained a sense of artistic freedom from his discoveries which offered him not only answers to his most pressing artistic needs but also a vision for the future. Focusing on psychological drama, he began to formulate his own ideas and concepts as they would relate to modern Greek theatre and the contemporary Greek sociopolitical reality. Finally, he arrived at an approach that sought not only to mirror psychological reality, as in expressionism, but to bridge it with physical appearance; a synthesis that was

very close, as he admitted himself, to Vakhtangov's concept of "fantastical realism." This synthesis of the exterior truth of representational reality with the inner, psychological complexity of modern man provided him with the antidote to the shallowness of the Boulevard tradition as well as a fresh look at realism. Ultimately, it brought him to the threshold of what he called "poetic realism" and exemplified by the works of those "pioneers of the psychological drama," Ibsen and Chekhov, and the works of some of their finest contemporaries and successors such as Strindberg, Pirandello, O'Neill, Shaw and others:

. . . I believe it is the artist's duty to examine carefully external reality, to study it, to pursue to perfection how to render it best, but at the same time never to forget that his ultimate goal is not the simple copying of nature's creation, but what meaning he gives to it himself, as a human being, driven by his poetic and philosophical perception of life, his mind, his blood, his soul. If a cloud that passes moves us, our goal is not to mirror this creation of nature. Our goal is to integrate in a wider synthesis a certain meaning awakening within us. What I want to stress particularly is that the goal of our art is not the object itself but the meaning we give to it. How will we recreate it and how will it finally be shaped and merged with our soul's light and not simply rendered as it appears in the blinding light of the moment it passes. In other words, I believe in a certain kind of inner realism, something closer perhaps to what Vakhtangov, a student of Stanislavsky, called in his diary, fantastical realism, as the antithesis of his teacher's naturalism and the antithesis of the absolute exterior representation and theatrical conventionalism of Tairov.⁴

The struggle during that transient era in Russian theatre and history to redefine theatricality and the

⁴Ibid., p. 26.

actor's inner and outer work within the context of psychological and physical reality awakened Koun to the rich poetic qualities inherent in realism and changed his perception of the realistic drama. His prior indifference to realism was due to the general absence in Greek theatre of the best representative works of that genre as well as its strong association with the inane boulevard drama that dominated Greek theatre at the time and offered, at best, nothing more than mindless diversion. Moreover, the extensive experimentation of the Russians and their frequent intermingling of different styles and forms in search of greater meaning and truth shed new light on Koun's artistic past. It helped him reevaluate his years with the Laiki Skini and the Kollegeio and place them into an artistic and historical perspective that fully justified them. He realized that although his "aesthetic perception" remained fundamentally unchanged, its actual expression had to adapt to the times. "Popular expressionism" with its strong ties to folk art and tradition had to yield to the psychological drama and to poetic realism. It was not a question of denying an aesthetic expression but of allowing it to develop, of not becoming bound to it at the expense of growth:

. . . The fundamental basis of my aesthetic perception is completely the same regardless of whether I began with folk theatre and today out of both inner and outer needs I have arrived at psychological drama. I continue to search for the plastic qualities in posture, movement and speech. I believed then that art

was not the exact photographic representation of the life around us but life as seen by the artist's inner vision and filtered through his emotions. I still believe the same today.

I believed in the crystallization of feelings, the elimination of anything unnecessary, the technical synthesis of an interpretation after a deep analysis of the reality of the world outside us. I still believe the same today. . . .

And if today as in 1933 I search essentially for the same thing, in other words the deeper meaning, the truth of external reality as reflected in my spiritual world and given dimensionality and rhythm, nevertheless I differ only in that now I feel free of tradition's aesthetic limitations and the collectively accepted perception that folk art imposed on me, restrictions that bind the spiritual and intellectual development of a human being. . . .⁵

Although Koun felt free of tradition's prescriptive aesthetics, he never denied the importance of cultural continuity or the inspirational wealth inherent in folk art. He never lost touch with his past nor abandoned the traditional sources that provided the thrust to his artistic endeavors at the start of his career. His work always reflected a cultural connection with his native and ethnic past no matter how foreign or avant garde the material was. But, in an era marked by changes, tradition is as much in the making as it is a thing of the past. It is always in the process of inventing itself, forcing accepted perceptions to be constantly reevaluated. In "popular expressionism," Koun transformed Greek folk art and tradition into a stylistic aesthetic resembling naive art in the hope that through an unaffected simplicity he would

⁵Ibid., p. 25-6.

create a genuine cultural link and awareness in the theatre. The experiment worked but its naive aesthetics soon proved too limited in face of the overwhelming changes, complexities and needs of modern life. By the time of the *Theatro Technis*, contemporary reality demanded a different, more intricate aesthetic approach. The time was ripe in Greece for psychological drama and Koun was ready for it:

. . . [we] live surrounded by buses and cars. With every step we take we turn a corner; here a poster on a wall; here a destitute pauper lying exhausted on the sidewalk; thousands of worries and many psychological changes.

All these things lead by necessity towards the creation of a more personal composition and a more personal aesthetic means of expression. The countless emotional encounters and psychological changes we are faced with make us see our exterior reality in many different ways. Today, we might have a more meaningful, more poetic and more aesthetically moving experience by a lover shrugging his shoulders or the stutter in his voice or by a simple yes or no than a tirade of twenty well-written verses.

To offer today a more aesthetically moving experience we must seek new forms, new meanings and a contemporary means of expression taken from the needs of our interior and exterior reality. And I am obliged here to say that for us the prototypes of contemporary psychological drama have been and still remain Ibsen on one side, Chekhov on the other and various other writers of smaller weight that have succeeded them. In them, above all, we have discovered ourselves, in the amalgam they offer us of an exterior reality seen by the eye of a cultivated and evolved poet/creator. Perhaps some of the social problems they have presented us we might consider today dated and resolved, although I have certain reservations on this issue as well. The road they paved, however, with their poetry, their psychological insight, the meanings of life they gave us, the structural and technical composition of their works, will remain for a long time the prototype for future development in the theatre.⁶

⁶Ibid., p. 27-8.

When the *Laiki Skini* was created, in 1933, one of its primary objectives was to be an alternative to realism and the degenerate forms of the realistic drama that dictated the norm and dominated Greek theatre, at the time. This rebellion was launched by Koun even earlier when he began to experiment with stylization in his production of *Stathis*, at the *Kollegeio*, which later evolved into what became known as "popular expressionism." This disaffection with realism was not confined to Koun. The preceding decade's efforts at infusing new life on the Greek stage were predominantly anti-realistic. Though short lived, these attempts created a momentum in the struggle for better theatre that culminated in 1932 with the restoration of the *Vasiliko Theatro* as the Greek National Theatre which, in the first decade of its existence, was essentially expressionistic in its approach.

Unlike Koun's native brand of expressionism the stylistic approach chosen by the Greek National Theatre to combat the evils of realism was modeled after the German expressionist movement of the previous decade. That emulation became even more pronounced in the years following the untimely death, in 1934, of the company's first artistic director, *Fotos Politis*. The German expressionist aesthetic, however, had little in common culturally with the Mediterranean, sunny disposition of the Greeks. Although many of the National Theatre's early productions were

technically and artistically impressive, the mood they created was too cold and detached for Greek sensibilities and perpetuated a misguided identification of the Greeks with the Germans which had its roots in German romanticism and dated as far back as the early nineteenth century.

Koun's temperament, on the other hand, was a Mediterranean blend of East and West that was strongly shared by the majority of the Greeks whose identity was more inclined towards Anatolia than to Germany. In his work, he always sought the answers to his artistic problems in ways that would be harmonious with that temperament. His "popular expressionism," with its bold concentration on Greek tradition and folk art was a revolt against the third-rate, Western-style realism and boulevard theatre of the time in a manner attuned to Greek sensibilities. With his discovery of the Russian innovators and psychological drama, however, Koun was able to reconcile his differences with realism and overcome the shortcomings of "Popular expressionism" in a manner that was, once again, responsive to the demands of contemporary Greek reality, without betraying the Greek identity.

Strange and ironic as it may seem, the environment created by the Second World War, the occupation and the ensuing deprivation and suffering, seemed to lend itself ideally, according to Koun, to a return to basics and the charting of a new beginning: a beginning devoid of the

superficiality and paltriness of the professional/commercial theatre with its bag of cheap tricks, its star-oriented system and its mindless repertory. The country's sudden plunge to poverty, hunger, violence, fear, and death, eliminated all shallow illusions from daily life. As the social structure crumbled, humanity was suddenly revealed in all its nakedness. There was no room for pretense and affectation. For Koun, this was a time for spiritual renewal and for a collective commitment to ideals that promised a better world:

. . . The period of the occupation was emotionally charged. You took a lot and you gave a lot. We were surrounded by dangers, deprivations, violence and terror. That's why, as a people, we felt the need for faith, trust, brotherhood, exultation and sacrifice. We felt the need for a better world; a world with fewer human imperfections for those who would survive. We defied death and hunted after life with a rage, without caution, protection or humble thoughts. We were genuine and real. The repertory of works we were preparing was necessarily limited. But hidden in the rehearsal table were the works which we hoped to stage when we obtained our freedom. We were all in the resistance and almost all belonged to EAM [National Liberation Front]. Deeply inside me I cannot deny and forget those years, the years when we still believed in a world free of baseness and violence. . . .⁷

The unofficial date of the founding of the Theatro Technis is generally accepted as being somewhere at the beginning of 1942, during the worst of the German occupation. In 1987, in the first of a series of newspaper articles honoring Koun following his death, Lykourgos Kallergis reported that on a cold winter's night, Koun

⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

gathered a group of friends and colleagues in a dreary room where he was living, to announce to them his proposal for a new beginning in Greek theatre or, as Kallergis put it, "the regeneration of the people through the art of the theatre."⁸ Although the setting lacked the grandeur of the theatre of Dionysus where, forty years earlier, Kostandinos Christomanos, of the Nea Skini, made his celebrated plea for a "new beginning," Koun's appeal possessed all the right ingredients to rouse his listeners in support of his venture.

In the fulfillment of its promise, however, the Theatro Technis has proven to be much more than just another ambitious but misguided, short-lived illusion for a new beginning. It has endured far longer than the Nea Skini or any other theatre company founded with similar objectives and has successfully continued its existence to the present. The only exception and the only other company to compare with the Theatro Technis's longevity and success is, of course, the Greek National Theatre which has had the advantage and fortune, in good and bad times, of being subsidized by the government. The Theatro Technis, on the other hand, without any government support in the first three decades of its life, has survived against all odds and, almost half a century later, continues to play an active and vital part in the country's dramatic activities.

⁸Lykourgos Kallergis, Ethnos 23 February 1987, p. 23.

Present among the guests at that auspicious gathering were, among others, Koun's trusted colleague Lykourgos Kallergis, the musician Manos Chadzidakis (internationally known for his music in the film Never on Sunday), the set designer Giannis Stefanellis, the folk dancer and choreographer Dora Stratou, the playwright Giorgos Sevastikoglou and the critic Marios Ploritis. All of them have risen to the highest rank in their respective fields and are representative of a generation that has been instrumental in the artistic direction taken by the country since the end of the Second World War.

There are no written documents to reveal what Koun told his invitees that night, to inspire them to join him in the founding of the Theatro Technis. It is generally accepted, however, based on casual remarks by some who were present, that much of what he said was repeated a year and a half later in a speech he gave to the Association of Friends of the Theatro Technis. The Association was established in the summer of 1943, following an appeal by Koun to those who had backed him and the Theatro Technis from the beginning, to help finance the company's summer season. Although the immediate reason for the creation of the Association was to overcome the economic hardship at hand, its long-term objective was to develop, through an ongoing and direct exchange of ideas, a greater understanding between the company and its public. In that speech, entitled "The

Social Position and Aesthetic Line of the Theatro Technis," Koun discussed the company's goals, social responsibilities and aesthetic perceptions. The speech, which has subsequently been published, became in time the company's undeclared manifesto to whose principles it has closely adhered since it was founded.

For Koun, the relationship between the company and its public was not to be taken lightly. In his view, a true art theatre could not meet its highest potential without the active participation of the audience in the company's affairs, a role that was in direct opposition to the escapism and passivity of the commercial theatre's public. The audience had to be included as an integral, organic part of the company with a share in all its responsibilities. One of the first items discussed in his speech to the Association of Friends of the Theatro Technis was the close interrelationship he wished to establish between the company and the public. Although not the greater public, the Association was an idealized reflection of it and was expected to act as an intermediary that would open the way for more and more people to come to the theatre and join forces in building the kind of theatrical tradition the Theatro Technis wished to see firmly established in the future:

Alone each of us is weak. Alone each of you, who are the closest to our efforts, is weak. Together we may be able to accomplish something. Theatre, as an art form, offers us the possibility to join together, to

move each other, to touch one another, to feel a truth together. That's why we chose the theatre as a form of expression of our spiritual world. . . .

. . . Beginning with the conviction that there could be no theatre without public, we thought of creating the Association of friends of the Theatro Technis. In order for our relationship not to remain purely theoretical, in order to attain, with time, a more intimate contact between us and eventually performers and spectators can become one, we decided to hold meetings, like today's, to deal with subjects relating to the Art and, primarily, to our work. Thus, by keeping you abreast of every detail regarding our effort and cultivation we create, based on our mutual intellectual development, a firm bond between us. You the friends, today two thousand, tomorrow three and so on, comprise the link between our theatre and the greater public. And something more. You, along with the members of the company comprise the Theatro Technis.

Only through our complete mutual understanding can the theatre stand on its own two feet and fulfill its objective.

Only with an active stand on both our parts can its existence be realized. You must not be just simple spectators. You must be a party to the creation of a civilized cultural effort. I believe it is inevitable for the Association of friends to play an increasingly more active part in the life of the company.

Today our collaboration consists of performances and discussions. Tomorrow, we have to think of something that will bring us even closer. That is our mutual obligation. It is our absolute conviction that the Theatro Technis is all of us together. We have the same obligations towards the theatre as you. You must try to understand the effort, to believe in it, to become fanatical about it. . . .⁹

The founding of the Theatro Technis seemed justified to Koun only if it aimed at filling the great vacuum in modern Greek theatre which had become even more prominent since the outbreak of the Second World War. Its creation would be totally unnecessary and its purpose utterly meaningless if it were to become just another theatre among

⁹Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 24-25.

the existing ones for the sole reason of competing with them on the same level. In his opening remarks to the Association of Friends of the Teatro Technis, he addressed precisely that point, hoping to make it clear from the outset that the Teatro Technis by virtue of its mission would have to be, "above all else," different:

When in June of last year [1942], following intense preparations with the students of the School, we had our first meeting with new and former students as well as young actors who had worked with me in the professional theatre, and we established the fundamentals of our work with the Teatro Technis, we all agreed above all else that our theatre would have no reason for being if it did not differ completely from existing theatres.

Let it not be attributed to us by this either impudence or disrespect. We don't wish to ascribe blame or to offend anyone. We only mean that we did not begin with the objective of adding one more theatre to the many existing ones and we did not establish as our finest ambition the mounting of productions that are better than those put on by this one or that one. . . .¹⁰

Thus, the Teatro Technis began its life on the premise that it be fundamentally different from all other theatres. How was this difference to manifest itself, however, and make the company not simply different from other theatres but also better? The answer to this question was to be found not only in Koun's purpose for the Teatro Technis, but also in the purpose and need he saw for the art of the theatre in general as a promoter human interests and values that would assert the dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization. The only purpose of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107 (my italics).

existing theatre, he felt, was to "ease [the spectator's] digestion." He saw little in its efforts that aimed at uplifting the public from the humdrum of its daily routine. His view, on the other hand, was that the true nature of the theatre, from which contemporary practices had hopelessly deviated, was to fulfill a spiritual, social and intellectual need. He believed that, as in all art, the theatre is a reflection and expression of life whose purpose, other than to divert, is to create--through the magic of its experience--a richer, more meaningful existence.

If the Theatro Technis was to succeed in its most critical objective--the cultural revival of the theatre in modern Greece--it had to begin by actively renouncing the corrupt practices of the present and past and start afresh. This return to basics combined with the passionate devotion to the art of theatre by all concerned, was the only means by which Koun felt the stifling artistic restrictions and limitations of the commercial theatre could be overcome. To achieve a greater more rewarding understanding of self and surroundings on either side of the footlights, a different kind of dedication was needed on the part of company members, one that would transcend the element of profit and the competition of egos and help awaken critical spirit in the audience. To set the standard, Koun described the work that the Theatro Technis was to embark on as a "mission."

Thus, he disassociated himself from the irreverence of contemporary professional practices in the theatre and elevated the work of the Theatro Technis to the selfless task of a spiritual commitment:

We say mission but we are not frightened by the word, nor are we troubled by the idea, because only with absolute faith and sacrifice to a higher idea can we acquire strength and unity and bring to the surface, for its fulfillment, the spiritual wealth buried within us. We have to believe in miracles to make miracles happen. We have to distance ourselves from all decay, disbelief, denial and egocentricity, in order to help the little god hidden inside everyone fly out. Above all else we need faith in something beyond ourselves, greater than ourselves.

Only that will help us grow. In view of the work we have chosen we are small, very small from every angle and in every respect. Without our work we are nothing. Because of it, we acquire entity and life. The awareness of it gives us faith in our mission.

In this way we clarify perhaps the beginning of our journey; a beginning and a need that is purely spiritual. Why spiritual? For a richer, more beautiful and more deeply fulfilled life; an uplifting of ourselves; a greater understanding of our surroundings through art and more specifically through theatre. In other words the Theatro Technis is an expression of life. . . . We don't make theatre for the sake of the theatre. We don't make theatre in order to live. We make theatre to enrich ourselves and the public that comes to see us, and to help create together a far-reaching, spiritually rich and integral culture in our country.¹¹

With the generous help of a benefactor (Kostas Hadjiargyris) the Theatro Technis' expenses for its first year were met and, in the spring of 1942, work began for the company's premiere season scheduled to open in October of that year. One of the first things secured, once the company's existence was financially assured, was the

¹¹Ibid., pp. 13-14 (my italics).

performance space. A small but adequate house in the center of Athens, the Alikis theatre, was rented for five nights a week for the duration of the season, with enough money left over to cover the cost of costumes and sets. As with the Laiki Skini, the Theatro Technis included a drama school for the training of its young actors. Instruction was assumed, once again and almost exclusively, by Koun who now tried to imbue his students with the new ideas and techniques he had discovered via the Russians.

The time-consuming preparations coupled by an expected lack of training staff, soon compelled Koun to incorporate his teaching activities with rehearsals, as he had done a decade earlier with the Laiki Skini. This method had worked well for him in the past and, under the present circumstances, was the only feasible way by which to meet, within the time frame, the company's objectives for its first season. Teaching was second nature to Koun, and his students and colleagues admired and respected him all the more for it. His popularity and success as a teacher were due not so much to some unique pedagogical approach, but to his ability to inspire and motivate through his knowledge, love and dedication to the theatre. This natural, innate tendency to impart what he knew best and loved most caused no professional conflicts. On the contrary, it became the trademark of his artistic persona, for which he was highly regarded, and the reason he

eventually became affectionately known to all as "the Teacher," a title by which he is still remembered today.

. . . Karolos Koun is above all and in the full sense of the word a teacher. He knows how to electrify youth and to win it over in the service of the art of the theatre. He enchants his students and they adore him. He imparts them his passion for the theatre; the heartfelt conviction that once they enter the sanctuary of this tortuous faith they don't belong to themselves but to its doctrine. A hard, rough and inhuman doctrine. It is often said that his students "resemble" him and that they are, amongst themselves, the "same." He molds them according to the same "prototype" [himself], whereas the ideal teacher's duty and plan should be the "mecum tecum" or the "become who you are" of the ancients. Quite possibly. But these students have so much to gain from this likeness, until they can become able to break off (something much more substantial and deeper) and thus claim the right and the ability to unhook themselves.¹²

Koun never formulated his own theory of acting, nor did he ever set down his personal "system" or "method" for aspiring actors. The reason, perhaps, was because he felt his views on the subject had been more than adequately covered by others (such as Stanislavsky) or because his intuitive, artistic nature had little patience for systematizing. Others have observed that his lack of interest in critically documenting his experience in the theatre was an illustration of the man's total immersion in his work which made his relationship to the theatre intimate and direct rather than impersonal and abstract. Whatever the case, Koun the artist and teacher has earned his place

¹²E. P. Papanoutsos, "O thaskalos" ["The teacher"]. In Karolos Koun, 25 chronia theatro, pp. 54-55.

in twentieth century Greek theatre as one of its greatest benefactors. Not only did he redefine the meaning of the word "theatre" for modern Greeks with his innovative and imaginative productions, he also inspired and nurtured numerous artists. The number of actors that have come out of the school of the Theatro Technis over the years and who have pursued successful careers, either with the company or elsewhere, is, by any standard, phenomenal. But it wasn't only actors Koun inspired, but also playwrights, directors, designers, musicians and countless others driven by the sheer love of and need for the theatre.

For Koun, theatre at its finest meant a collective art. The final product, as seen on stage in the presence of an audience, was to be a combined effort between different artists working together towards the same end. In the sphere of the drama, the mutual interdependence of the actor, the playwright, the director, the set designer, is a given. The high priest, however, in Koun's artistic hierarchy of the theatre was the actor. The actor was the living force and human element through whom the theatre, ultimately, acquired its form. For Koun, an actor himself, the actor was, in the finest Stanislavskian tradition, the theatre's center of gravity and bore the greatest responsibility for its success.

It is only natural, therefore, that the most effective way Koun envisioned to make the necessary

breakthroughs in the theatre was, first and foremost, by the creation of good actors. Only through the disciplined training of the actor on a spiritual, intellectual and physical level, he felt, would the theatre make the hoped for advances in Greece. This, of course, was not intended at the expense of the other constituent parts of the theatre. He did not wish to exclude or undermine the importance of the playwright, the director, the designer, but it is quite apparent from the tone of his speech to the Friends of the Theatro Technis, that the central message of his address was this: as the actor's skills, intellectual growth and spiritual awareness improved, so would the public's appreciation of the theatre, which in turn would have a definite positive influence on the work of the other contributors to the stage.

But if the actor was to be the heartbeat of the drama, he had to be so as part of an artistic collective committed to ideals strong enough to resist the temptations of the commercial theatre. For Koun, the commercial theatre represented all that is bad and must be totally avoided. He considered it a market where actors were treated like commodities, where the only objective was commercial notoriety and success, and where the businessman as producer reigned supreme. Other than the National Theatre there were no real alternatives to it. Koun's idea of the theatre was diametrically opposed to the corrupt practices

of the establishment. He was a visionary who, to prevent the Theatro Technis from becoming prey to the snares of the professional/commercial theatre and to protect his actors from falling victims to the allure of the star system, with its fashionable prima donnas and its promises for commercial rewards, demanded that all company members must work within a tightly knit artistic collective:

. . . [we] created the Theatro Technis with the foremost goal of preventing any personal speculation and gain to affect anyone connected with our theatre and thus, circumvent the destructive influence of the businessman. To counterattack the prima donna attitudes of the actors we declared it a rule that our theatre will be a collective theatre and its employees equally rewarded.¹³

The idea of a "collective," however, is ambiguous, for the mere sound of the word conjures up images of uniformity, equality and sameness at the expense of individual achievement. It evokes systems of austere control aiming to undermine the individual in favor of a uniform group (a utopia), whose members would be "equally rewarded" regardless of their merit. This is not what Koun had in mind and he tried to make it clear from the very beginning what he meant by "collective theatre":

. . . With collective theatre we don't mean a theatre where there will be no room for the best and the outstanding and where in favor of mediocrity every true worth and talent will be neglected. It is stupid and destructive for anyone to believe in mental, intellectual and artistic equality. We are eager, willing and ready to provide every means to lift the weaker higher. And the more we can raise, the greater

¹³Ibid., p. 20 (my italics).

will our joy and satisfaction be. But that does not mean that for the benefit of some theoretical equality the ablest must stoop. That goes against both the development of an art form as well as the cultural development of a nation. . . .

. . . The primary goal of our theatre, even if it is a collective theatre, is to offer as much as possible and with the means available to it, the most fully prepared intellectual nourishment to the public and not make artistic concessions for fear that it might displease some of its workers. Otherwise, instead of creating a theatre where each actor has his place, we risk the danger of creating a theatre where we replace one prima donna with many prima donnas and the collective theatre would become, essentially, a utopia. But it is neither a utopia nor something created from one day to another. . . .¹⁴

The notion of the theatre as a "collective expression" was not new to Koun. From the very beginning of his career he had demanded that the theatre be approached as such. He expected that of the Laiki Skini and, more outspokenly later, of the Theatro Technis. In an interview conducted in 1973 by Giorgos Pilichos, for the newspaper Ta Nea, he readdressed the issue by answering two questions dealing, once again, with the need that led to his creation of the Theatro Technis:

What was the fundamental reason that made you decide to create the Theatro Technis?

The need to create a collective theatre by a team that had learned to think and work with spiritual and organic unity; a team specifically trained and compliant with a new teaching of dramatic expression that would, in time, take shape and serve, as best as possible, theatrical works that are revelatory both to the interpreters and the public. The creation of a theatre outside the commercial sphere, a theatre unbound to the

¹⁴ Ibid pp. 20-21.

businessman, free of prima donna attitudes, unyielding to artistic compromises.

What led you to that need, as you mentioned before, to create a "collective theatre"?

The work of the theatre depends, by necessity, on the close association--collaboration--of many contributors and the contribution of each and all towards a common goal. There are, of course, those who offer more and those who offer less, there is also a hierarchy, but all must contribute, each within his power, to the proper function of the theatre. A theatrical expression is a collective expression and not, as in other arts, individual.¹⁵

In keeping with Koun's promise to mount plays based on their artistic merit and not on their potential commercial success, the play chosen to commemorate the birth of the Theatro Technis was Ibsen's The Wild Duck, a difficult work to stage and not a favorite among a boulevard-theatre-oriented audience. Ibsen had always been a major influence among "art-theatre" pioneers, particularly with his plays dealing with moral hypocrisy and social corruption, and Koun was no exception. The choice of The Wild Duck, besides the intrinsic merits that have made it a great play, was made because it was perceived by the company as "one of the most representative works of this founder of modern theatre"¹⁶ and modern Greek theatre was, after all, what the Theatro Technis aimed at establishing.

¹⁵Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp. 31-32 (my italics).

¹⁶Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1948 (Athens: Ikaros, 1948), p. 11.

Another reason was due, perhaps, to the play's explicit blend of realism and symbolism which lent itself easily to Koun's emerging aesthetic approach of "fantastical realism."

The response of the press following the premiere was more than Koun could ever have dreamed of under the circumstances. Laudatory reviews and comments were written by practically all the critics who attended the production, hailing the Theatro Technis with comments like an "oasis in our barren times," "new blood. . . poured in the veins of Greek theatre," "the breath of true art" and "artistic excellence."¹⁷ This kind of overwhelming critical response gave the company and its founder all the necessary encouragement to prod them to pursue with vigor the difficult task that lay ahead. Following is a more detailed sampling of the accolades that greeted the Theatro Technis the day after its very first public performance:

The gods of poetry and of the great and pure art of the theatre prevail even in these times of the utmost black-marketeering. And that was proven yesterday in the premiere production of the new "Theatro Technis" founded by the artist Mr. K. Koun. The public came and attended with deep respect the performance of The Wild Duck by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Modern Greek theatre breathed the breath of rebirth. Mr. Karolos Koun offers an artistic oasis in our barren times. . . . The production was ideal in all respects. The interpretation of this social and human drama was perfectly accomplished. . . . Not the slightest dissonance, not the slightest void.

M. Rodas

I left the theatre the day before yesterday filled with hopes, hopes that were made even greater after I read

¹⁷Ibid., p. 13.

the list of plays the Theatro Technis is planning to stage. I thought that new blood is being poured in the veins of Greek theatre and that this blood could do no less than to nourish a rich blossoming.

A. Chourmouziotis

From the moment the curtain went up in the Alikis theatre, the large crowd attending the premiere immediately understood that it was about to witness an exceptional performance bearing the stamp of creative hard work and the breath of true art.

A. Mamakis

There is no doubt that the Theatro Technis will live up to its objective. The sample of its work, offered in yesterday's performance, was without exaggeration artistic excellence.

I. Stogiannis¹⁸

The Wild Duck was soon followed by Strindberg's fairy tale drama Swanwhite and the rest of the season included Ibsen's Rosmersholm, Pirandello's Right You Are if You Think You Are, a modern Greek play by Giorgos Sevastikoglou called Kostandinou Kai Elenis [Constantine's and Helen's] and closed with Shaw's Fanny's First Play. On the program of the fourth production (Rosmersholm, January 1943) appeared the first public declaration by the Theatro Technis, stating briefly but succinctly what it was and what it stood for:

The name of our theatrical organization reveals our mission: the love and faith for the theatre brought us together, we who now constitute the theatre troupe "Theatro Technis"--director, actors, stage designers, authors, translators and musicians--with the singular goal of working for the creation of a theatre along the road of pure art.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 13.

We feel that we have an obligation to truly and honestly dedicate every human power and artistic capability to the theatrical effort of our land.

"The Theatro Technis" is a collective theatre.

Everyone of its workers, from the director to the mechanic and from the protagonist to the walk-ons are equal contributors--each from his own perspective and as fitting his abilities--to the fulfillment of artistic creation.

We work honestly and are consciously aware that artistic creativity succeeds out of a hard individual struggle in the investigation and search for artistic truth¹⁹

The critics' responses continued to be very favorable throughout the season but unfortunately, flattering reviews, as the ones above, were not enough to permanently secure the financial future of the Theatro Technis. By the summer of 1943 the company had depleted all its funds and its summer season depended on the support of potential benefactors. Koun's solution to the financial crunch, seeing that no backers were coming to the rescue, was to organize the Society of Friends of the Theatro Technis. As a result, a subscription series was organized where every subscriber would have to pay in advance two thirds of his discounted ticket as well as the box office tax. Two thousand subscribers joined in the effort and enough money was collected to salvage the summer season, which included Shaw's You Never Can Tell and Pirandello's Man, Beast and Virtue. The productions did not share in the

¹⁹Lykourgos Kallergis, Ethnos 25 February 1987, pp. 26-27 (my italics).

success of the winter season, primarily because the only theatre available (the Delphi) was located too far out of the city's center, making it very difficult for the public to attend.

With the coming of its second season, the Teatro Technis found itself, once again, in desperate need of funds. The subscriber approach that had proven somewhat successful during the summer was no longer feasible, since the astronomical inflation caused by the war made money worthless from one day to the next. Just when things seemed to be at their most hopeless, however, another benefactor appeared who was able to rescue the company from its financial predicament and let it pursue its plans for the next season. This precarious existence of the Teatro Technis was to go on for many years, existing constantly at the brink of bankruptcy and ruin. But faith, determination and perhaps a little "miracle" seemed always to save the company, at the eleventh hour, giving it that necessary push to go on.

Having had so much success with Ibsen in its first season, the Teatro Technis opened its 1943-44 season with an Ibsen festival in repertory. The Wild Duck and Rosmersholm were revived and Ghosts was produced for the first time. The only American play produced during the German occupation was Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road, staged later in the season under the title "For a Piece of

Land," supposedly written by a French playwright named Caudel. The play's action was transplanted from the American South to the plains of Argentina, and its characters' names changed from English to Spanish. This was done because of German censorship, which forbade the production of plays written by authors from Allied countries (Bernard Shaw's plays were allowed on the grounds that he was Irish). Other plays produced that year included Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author and Xenopoulos' Stella Violandi. The critics greeted the Ibsen festival with the same barrage of accolades they had greeted The Wild Duck in the first season:

The enthusiasm and emotional response of the Athenian public for this work [Ghosts] confirm the unquestionable proof that our public has acquired awareness and has advanced forward. With its Ibsen productions and the loving passion it has incited for the theatre, the Theatro Technis is becoming for all of us a place of unexpected optimism. This new theatre will remain a guarantee for the artistic courage and the organization of our new generation. Alive still, it enters and treads in history.

T. Kastanakis

The Theatro Technis maintains undiminished. . . its enthusiasm to serve pure art. It offers her all its forces. It deserves unreserved appreciation and sympathy. . . . It never betrays its basic goal and mission, it never distances itself from the region where it wishes and aspires to stand.

A. Thrylos

The above work [Ghosts] is, of course, one of the most difficult. . . . Its interpretation was worthy of the promises and efforts of Mr. Koun. To sum up, the Ibsenic atmosphere was created with unparalleled skill and the studied characters of yesterday's performance displayed great unity.

M. Rodas²⁰

²⁰Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1948, p. 13.

Xenopoulos' Stella Violandi (first performed in 1909 by the "dame" of the Greek stage, Marika Kotopouli) was the second Greek play to be produced by the Theatro Technis. As a genre, it was a typical nineteenth century melodrama of poor boy in love with rich girl, with mild Ibsenian touches on corruption and hypocrisy in family life. Koun's approach to the play, however, resorted to no melodramatic devices. It was sensitive and straightforward, concentrating on the lovers' conflict without musical or other kinds of embellishments. The production was so impressive that the author himself, who is considered by many to be the father of modern Greek drama, came out of semi-retirement, at the age of seventy-seven, to express his awe and admiration for the staging of his play:

. . . I am deeply moved as I have never been moved before in any other "opening" of one of my plays, old or new. . . . This profound emotional stir within me today was borne, above all, out of the touching response of the people that surrounded me [opening night at the theatre]. . . . I have never felt such a response for one of my works. I have never heard such a heartfelt, such an animate applause as that which rocked the entire theatre at the end of each act. . . . Judging from the indescribable reaction of the public, its emotional response, its enthusiasm [Xenopoulos watched the performance from backstage], I conclude with certainty that Koun's teaching and the performance of his actors, and above all that of the protagonists who carried most of the play's weight, was simply perfect. . . .²¹

²¹Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

Koun did not stage many modern Greek plays during the first phase of the Theatro Technis' existence (1941-1950), a factor that did not go unnoticed by some critics. Although not a great drama compared to the other plays presented during the season, Stella Violandi was one of the better plays of modern Greek dramaturgy. The simple approach to the play by Koun in terms of staging and acting, and the strict concentration on what was dramatically essential helped expose the intrinsic qualities of the play buried beneath the melodrama. Koun's ability to discern and bring out the hidden qualities in a play was an invaluable tool in his quest for dramatic truth which proved particularly useful in the mid fifties when, on a broader scale, he became a leading exponent of the identification and promotion of a new generation of Greek playwrights, a generations is now considered as the finest in the history of modern Greek theatre.

The generally favorable critical and public response that the Theatro Technis enjoyed in the first two years of its life seemed to confirm the earnestness of the personal and artistic commitment of its members who persevered with tenacity and fortitude, in spite of the great difficulties they faced. Nonetheless, the second season, like the first, closed with a large deficit, while the second summer suffered even greater setbacks than the first. Desperate efforts were made by the company to find a suitable summer

theatre, but they had to settle for the only one available, thereby restricting the company to only one performance a week. Thus limited, the Theatro Technis produced just one play that summer, The Last White Crow, by Alexis Solomos, a student of Koun at the Kollegeio and a prominent theatre director today in Greece, as well as the author of many books on the theatre.

By the fall of 1944 the German army was in retreat and much of Greece, including Athens, had been liberated. But the taste of freedom was soon to turn sour because of certain events occurring at the end of the year, triggering the bitter internecine feud which lasted until the end of the decade. In December 1944, right-wing police squads fired on a huge left-wing political rally in Athens setting off what is now known in Greek history as the Battle of Athens and is remembered by all Greeks as the Dekemvriana [the December events]. The siege lasted thirty-three days, paralyzing the entire city. When it was over, 13,500 lives had been lost and Athens lay practically in ruins.

As Athens came to a virtual standstill so did any plans for a theatrical season that year. Theatres, as everything else, were forced to close for the duration of the fighting. When order was finally restored and the theatres reopened, however, actors faced empty auditoriums as the public, horrified by the recent events, was too discouraged and disillusioned to attend. Although the

Theatro Technis tried to salvage whatever remained of the 1944-45 season by mounting four productions (Gorky's The Lower Depths, Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, Aeschylus' Choephoroi and Gogol's The Marriage) attendance was minimal and the run financially disastrous. A tour of northern Greece in the summer of 1945, in an effort to recuperate some of the losses, proved even more disastrous. By the end of the summer the Theatro Technis was bankrupt, but more menacing to its existence was the fact that its hopes and ideals had been crushed by the civil war that followed the German retreat. Having lost the strength and faith that held it together, the company was forced to disband and its members scattered in all directions:

. . . With the liberation and the post-occupation period, everything came undone. In 1945 the Theatro Technis was forced to stop operating. We expected certain things but were greeted by others. Ideals, dreams and prospects were badly hit and destroyed. Above all, there was an absence of faith; of faith and of the communication and contact amongst ourselves.²²

The break-up lasted a year, during which Koun returned, once again, to his friend Katerina and her company. He worked with her during the entire 1945-46 season, directing five plays which included Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man and Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes. Public demand, as a confirmation that the Theatro Technis did fill a certain void in Greek theatre, soon compelled Koun to renew his independent artistic efforts. By the end

²²Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, p. 109.

of his collaboration with Katerina he had successfully regrouped the Theatro Technis and, in the spring of 1946, began preparations for a return to the stage in the 1946-47 season. Thus, in the fall of 1946, while the rest of country was by now consumed in a full fledged civil war (fought mainly in the mountainous regions of northern Greece), the Theatro Technis, with renewed strength, faith and hope, inspired by the public's desire for its reestablishment, returned to the stage at its old home, the Alikis theatre. Although not financially successful, the 1946-47 season was not without artistic accomplishments with the highlight being Koun's production of Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie:

. . . I found a station of reinvigoration in the artistic group of Mr. Karolos Koun, which possesses a true sense of direction for intellectual progress and culture. The Theatro Technis continues its tradition and battles for an ideal: to bring back to life [in Greece] the intellectual and artistic level [of the rest] of the world. . . . The scene between the two young characters [Jim O'Connor and Laura Wingfield, played by Koun himself and Elli Lambeti, a future "dame" of the Greek stage and film] will remain one of the most endearing memories to those who saw and applauded the poetic play by the American playwright.

Mich. Rodas

. . . The Glass Menagerie is a unique play that deserves special attention because it shows how even the most exhausted subject can be rebaptized when the author is touched and moved by it. . . . The interpretation delivered exquisitely the realistic and poetic atmosphere of the play. With the staging of The Glass Menagerie the Theatro Technis marked its second success this year [the first one being J. B. Priestley's Time and the Conways].

Alkis Thrylos²³

²³Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1948, pp. 25-26.

With the Germans out of Greece, the Teatro Technis was free for the first time to choose from a wide variety of works from the international repertory. Koun's dramatic interest from the very beginning of the company's history, although eclectic in nationality, concentrated mainly on works of contemporary dramatists (Ibsen and Chekhov honored as forever modern). The common denominator between many of these playwrights was their modified approach to realism, which essentially meant a distillation of many elements from the various anti-realistic dramatic movements of the past into the Ibsenian/Chekhovian mold of the realistic drama.

Throughout his career Koun tried always to keep abreast of international theatrical currents. Strengthened by his American-English education background, he became naturally drawn at the time towards the works of such pioneers of modern American drama as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and (to a lesser extent) the works of their British counterparts, J. B. Priestly, Terence Rattigan and Somerset Maugham. Most of the works by the above playwrights were staged by Koun (in that first phase of the Teatro Technis's existence) within months after they had been premiered in their own country. Furthermore, his particular affinity for American drama was to remain with him throughout his life, expressing itself in countless productions of plays written by the most prominent of modern American dramatists. Bernard Shaw was also an

important influence on Koun in that early period of the Teatro Technis, with three of his full-length plays having been produced by the company between 1942 and 1950.

The 1946-47 season ended, as usual, with a huge deficit caused partly by the forced closing of many foreign-play productions (a consequence of the country's social and political unrest), which seriously diminished the artistic level of the available repertory. With the financial and artistic situation so critical, Koun chose not to risk the 1947-48 season by mounting any productions during the summer. With the Teatro Technis dormant for a few months, he was also able to spend more time researching and preparing for the following season. To satisfy the director within him, he briefly resumed his collaboration with Katerina, directing her in three productions.

Koun's preparations during the summer months paid off and the Teatro Technis' fifth season (1947-48) enjoyed its greatest success, but yet in terms of public attendance and earnings although, by the end of the season, it fell short of breaking even, largely due to the previous season's huge deficit. They opened once again with an American play, Arthur Miller's All My Sons, and followed with another American play, Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse's Life With Father which had enjoyed a record run in New York City. These works were followed by two British plays, J. B. Priestley's An Inspector Calls and Terence Rattigan's The

Winslow Boy, and the season closed, in a celebratory mood, with Garcia Lorca's Blood Wedding.

Koun's direction of Miller's All My Sons shared in the great critical and public response that had greeted many of his previous productions. Once more he was hailed for his choice of material, for his impeccable direction which brought out all "the inner pathos of the drama," for the simplicity of his approach and for the company's superb ensemble playing which was conducted without "the slightest hesitation and with an enviable composure" giving the performance the "sense of wholeness."²⁴

Similar criticism followed the rest of the season's productions, particularly the last one, Lorca's Blood Wedding, which was one of the most difficult undertakings for Koun and the Teatro Technis thus far because of the technical difficulties involved in staging a play of that nature. Until now Koun had concentrated on works that did not require much spectacle because of the spatial limitations of the Alikis theatre. But the sense of achievement acquired by the seasons's all round success defied the obstacles posed by Lorca's play and Koun decided to celebrate the end of the season, as well as the Teatro Technis' fifth anniversary, by closing with a big production. The critics' response to Blood Wedding remained

²⁴Ibid., pp. 30-31.

consistent and the 1947-48 season ended with a triumphant, resounding success.

During the next two seasons (1948-49 and 1949-50) the Theatro Technis produced a total of eleven plays, which included O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings, Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman, Somerset Maugham's The Circle, Tennessee William's A Streetcar Named Desire (featuring the actress Mellina Merkouri) and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Neither season, however, shared in the overall artistic and financial success of the 1947-48 season.

In the meantime, the civil war had worsened and by November 1948 martial law was proclaimed throughout the country. The fighting continued to rage bitterly throughout Greece until a series of events brought the civil war to its conclusion in the summer of 1949. With the cessation of hostilities, however, emerged a country that had been drained both materially and spiritually:

. . . The period of the civil war added greatly to the already massive material destruction of the occupation, but, as the fighting was now not between German, Italian, or Bulgarian and Greek but between Greek and Greek, the civil war added a whole new dimension of hatred and division to the Greek tragedy. Some 80,000 Greeks were killed during the civil war, appalling atrocities were committed by both sides, some 20,000 Greeks were sentenced for offenses against the state, over 5,000 of them receiving death or life sentences, some 700,000 refugees, almost 10 per cent of the population, were forced to move from their homes. The Greeks had emerged from the First World War a divided nation, they were to emerge from the Second World War and the ensuing civil war even more divided. This latest division was to leave a legacy of bitterness

that was to cast a long shadow over Greece's post-war political development.²⁵

The consequences of the civil war were unavoidably devastating for the theatre as well and continued to be felt after the fighting had ended. They were reflected not only in terms of box office receipts but also in the general public's interest in the theatre; a public which, ravaged by the "dogs of war" for nearly a decade, needed, at least for the time being, to escape and forget.

As for the Theatro Technis, by 1950 there were other problems plaguing the company besides its constant financial predicament or the effects of the civil war. These were artistic problems and had to do with the "price of glory." In the course of its brief history and in spite of all obstacles, the Theatro Technis had managed to introduce to the stage many fine young actors and other theatre-related artists whose talent was immediately recognized and encouraged by the critics and public. But artistic success brought with it the prospect of a more lucrative and financially rewarding career in the commercial theatre. This resulted in a constant artistic drain which by 1950 had reached frustrating levels. The only feasible way for the Theatro Technis to grapple with the situation, at the time, would have been for the whole company to move towards that direction as it faced a kind of "commercialize or -----

²⁵Richard Clogg, A Short History of Modern Greece, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979) p. 162.

perish" syndrome. That in itself, was a greater and more insidious threat to the company as an "art theatre," for it threatened to undermine some of the fundamental principles that had brought it into existence. Asked in a newspaper interview by Giorgos Pilichos in 1972, what were "the greatest difficulties you faced in your efforts to form and protect. . . [in the past thirty years] the Theatro Technis?" Koun replied:

Barring the financial difficulties--often anguishing and almost insurmountable--the greatest difficulties we faced at the "Theatro Technis" was in the preservation of the inner unity of our theatre from personal ambitions, egotisms and weaknesses, and our own protection from such external threats as the theatre's commercial circuit, film, television and well as friends and critics. A collective theatre, dedicated to an artistic objective can easily disintegrate within the realm of the establishment.²⁶

Asked next if he "operates outside the establishment?" Koun responded with one of his most famous and most widely quoted answers:

Perhaps I too belong to the establishment, but I believe that fundamentally I operate against it.²⁷

Thus, by the end of its seventh season (1949-50), the Theatro Technis, as envisioned by Koun from its inception, was endangered not only by economic and political factors, but also by the impairment of its artistic objectives due to the temptations of the commercial

²⁶Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to theatre, p. 51 (my italics).

²⁷Ibid.

theatre. The spirit that had initially united the members of the company into an artistic collective--with the "singular goal of working for the creation of a theatre along the road of pure art" and thus outside the "realm of the establishment"--was being tainted by commercial success. The entire company was now seriously threatened to be engulfed by that "establishment" that Koun--and the Teatro Technis as an art theatre--had meant to "operate against."

The persistent personnel drain on the Teatro Technis, though difficult enough, was somehow predictable and Koun was reconciled to it. The commercialization of the company, however, was contrary to its very essence as an art theatre. It contradicted one of the fundamental principles of its existence, namely that it "would have no reason for being if it did not differ completely from existing theatres."²⁸ To prevent the Teatro Technis from drifting in that direction, which was hastened by the disillusioning effects of the civil war and the company's perpetual financial hardships, Koun decided, by the end of the summer of 1950, to disband the company altogether rather than see it embrace the "establishment" and transform itself into what it meant to be the alternative. This action brought to a close the first phase of the Teatro Technis existence, which had lasted eight years. In the course of that time it remained faithful to its artistic promises and refused to

²⁸Ibid., p. 13.

yield to compromises even in the face of the threat of
dissolution.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW THEATRO TECHNIS: THE REGROUPMENT OF THE
COMPANY IN 1954 AND ITS SUBSEQUENT IMPACT
ON CONTEMPORARY GREEK PLAYWRIGHTS

Between the dissolution of the Theatro Technis in 1950 and its regroupment in 1954, Koun worked as a guest director for the Greek National Theatre. The National Theatre had experienced its own share of problems as a result of the German occupation and civil war. Its star actress, Eleni Papadaki, whose professional achievements "left a legacy" to modern Greek actors, was summerily executed by the pro-communist ELAS (Greek Popular Liberation Army) shortly after the liberation for allegedly collaborating with the Nazis. The company's theatre had been badly damaged by the December 1944 battles and required massive reparations. Ideological disagreements that were either politically oriented or stemming from conflicting opinions on the "true" nature and function of a national theatre rocked the administrative side of the company for

many years with serious repercussions on its activities and artistic objectives.

The General Director of the National Theatre for the first two years of Koun's tenure there was Giorgos Theotokas (July 1950 to December 1952), a "man of letters" who had distinguished himself in Greek literary circles as a dramatist, poet, novelist and critic. This was the second time Theotokas held that prestigious position, the first being shortly after the liberation in 1945 during the most chaotic period of Greece's postwar political history. That appointment lasted fourteen turbulent months before he was dismissed by a new government that objected to his artistic perceptions.¹

By the time Koun entered the National Theatre he was a seasoned artist with a firmly established reputation as an innovative director and a style recognizably his own. His uncompromising artistic commitment, religious devotion to the theatre and the sincerity of his efforts were by now universally recognized. He was unanimously respected by his peers (even by those who did not see eye to eye with the characteristic personal touch that distinguished his productions) for his ceaseless efforts to improve and enrich modern Greek theatre. Commenting in 1959 (the 25th

¹For more on Theotokas and Greek theatre see chapter entitled "The Man of the Theater" in George Theotokas by Thomas Doulis (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1975), pp. 87-109.

anniversary of Koun's career in the theatre) on what had distinguished Koun as an artist, Theotokas described him as a "visionary" and observed that:

If Koun were a writer we would say he expresses a kind of mood. Every one of his works in the theatre is recognizable at first glance. In all his undertakings he reveals a particular personal touch, unique and inimitable--that which the Europe of recent years has defined as style. . . . After twenty five years [1934-1959]. . . it is my impression that Karolos Koun possesses a nature that is fundamentally religious. It is that which has so greatly distinguished him in Greece's contemporary artistic circles. He is a man who believes, and that attribute is rare among us today. He has never explained to us everything that he believes and I think that he keeps a lot to himself. But we feel, beyond doubt, that he is an idealist in the passionate service of a vision. I would say he possesses an apostolic passion. In another time he would have been a missionary, or the prior of a monastery.²

The appointment of Koun as guest director of the Greek National Theatre came as an overdue recognition of the founder of the Theatro Technis, as an established and acclaimed artist in his field, by the government as well as by the professional community. During his three year tenure there he staged five plays of his choice including, in the order of their production: Pirandello's Henry IV, Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, Chekhov's The Three Sisters, Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and Chekhov's Uncle Vanya. As expected, Koun brought to the National Theatre the same kind of passion and dedication that had

²Theatro Technis, Karolos Koun, 25 chronia theatro, pp. 52-53.

distinguished his work with the Theatro Technis. All five productions were critically acclaimed and reflected strongly that "unique and inimitable personal touch" described by Theotokas, which became the trademark of Koun's "style." One production in particular, as remembered by Aggelos Terzakis, a prominent Greek playwright who had known Koun since the thirties, seemed to embody Koun's artistry and style to perfection:

In all five plays that Koun staged during that period, he offered the same involvement and the same devotion. However, I believe (and this is not only my personal impression) that of the five, the memory of the Three Sisters will endure for a long time--at least as long as things endure in the fickle memory of the theatre. It was one of the most beautiful productions that the Greek stage has ever seen. With incredible sensitivity Koun had orchestrated the accents, the pauses, the inner rhythms, the undulations, all those immeasurable elements that weave the mystical melody of Chekhov. He had begun his search, as was his habit, in an arduous laboratory style atmosphere, in the closeness and intimacy of his actors and eventually succeeded in seizing on the major themes of his interpretation and giving them shape and form.³

What exactly was Koun's style? What was this mode of theatrical expression that was so distinct and unparalleled that made his productions and style easily recognizable? To attempt to answer this question by defining some characteristic traits in the material or structural design of his productions would be misleading. Perhaps his work with the Laiki Skini and the Kollegeio

³Ibid., p. 51.

might be well served by such an approach (a definition of his early style) since he was guided, at the time, by an aesthetic perception (Popular Expressionism) that possessed distinctive plastic qualities. The same might be true of Koun's staging of ancient Greek theatre when he returned to it, after a fifteen year absence, with Aristophanes' Plutus in the 1956-57 season of the new Theatro Technis. But Koun's "style" in the context of Theotokas's quote refers to his work with the Theatro Technis which, since the company's inception, had concentrated essentially on modern theatre and more specifically on the kind of drama that would fall under the category of what Koun regarded as "Poetic Realism." In an interview in 1973 for the newspaper Ta Nea Koun, never comfortable with the limits of artistic labeling and definitions, was asked by the interviewer Giorgos Pilichos to define his "style":

. . . I believe in Stanislavski who encouraged those who came after him to draw from their thoughts and experiences whatever will push their work forward and reject whatever stands an obstacle to their development. . . .

My aspiration was and still is the formation of an organic theatre, where the projection of poetry and truth of life create theatrical magic. A theatre where mind, senses, movement and voice are completely obedient to the form and designs of the play. It is a theatrical instruction whose technical basis and details developed gradually and were given form empirically.⁴

Although not an explicit answer, Koun's response does reveal some clues to his style through his references

⁴Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp. 61-62.

to "Stanislavski" and "organic theatre." Ever since the founding of the Teatro Technis and until the end of the fifties, Koun's dramatic interests had concentrated predominantly on his perception of "Poetic Realism" as it had developed from Ibsen and Chekhov to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Dramatic truth in Koun's "Poetic Realism" with its rich psychological content could not attain its finest expression through the plastic elements of design or the guidelines of some stylistic approach, as in Popular Expressionism. Similarly, the shallow content, the well-defined mechanics and the strict moral justice of the French-style boulevard theatre and urban melodrama that dominated the Greek stage throughout the century offered little help in uncovering the complexity of psychological drama. Dramatic truth in "Poetic Realism" relied on no theatrical artifice. It was firmly rooted in the play itself and depended for its realization on the work of an artistic collective.

For Koun, the pinnacle of that collective was the actors, for it was primarily through them that he believed a dramatic work acquired substance and ultimately became theatre; a group of actors whose artistic commitment, team-conscious effort and all-around physical, intellectual and spiritual training aimed at a naturalness and authenticity in their performance that reached beyond the limits of "phenomenal reality." "Poetic Realism" required an

introspective, soul-searching approach to performance (as opposed to the purely mimetic approach of common practice) that would bring to the stage the kind of intimacy, intensity and wholeness that Koun called "organic theatre." Theatrical accouterments such as set design, lighting, costuming and music, albeit important, were subservient to the written word and the actor's enactment of it; they did not dictate mood or form but simply highlighted them.

During the years immediately preceding the founding of the Teatro Technis, Koun had been rebaptized in the name of the Moscow Art Theatre and had consequently undergone an extensive artistic purification and renewal. Besides exposing him to the "inherent beauty" of "Poetic Realism" and the psychological drama, this artistic revitalization also focused his attention on the manifold problems of the actor. Like Stanislavski (his artistic and spiritual mentor), Koun sought truth and vitality in the theatre through a fresh approach to acting. Borrowing from Stanislavski's teachings, he tried to imbue the actors of the Teatro Technis with the principles of character development that would enable them not only to acquire technical skills, but also to grasp and reveal the psychological depth of the characters they portrayed.

It is in that respect that the Teatro Technis first excelled, and it is in that respect as well that Koun's unique personal touch or "style" first began to be revealed;

a style that emerged out of the needs of a specific type of drama ("Poetic Realism") and which depended on the team work of a company of actors rather than on one or two stars and a supporting cast. It was "organic theatre" because it evolved naturally, in a family-like atmosphere, by a group of artists who were bound together by their artistic convictions and driven by their mutual desire to elevate the standards of modern Greek theatre. The result was a remarkable stage intimacy and ensemble playing that was unprecedented for Greek theatre and which, eventually, became the trademark of the Teatro Technis. It is to that stage intimacy and ensemble playing that most people refer when they talk of "Koun's style."

Koun's style was further enhanced by his efforts at eliminating all remnants of traditional histrionics and theatrical artifice which allowed him, using Stanislavski's teachings as a guideline, to concentrate only on what was vitally important to the proper enactment of a play's "form and content." The Teatro Technis' approach to acting, as well as its choice of drama, represented a break from the general practices of "contemporary Greek prose theatre" which in 1943 Koun had described as having been:

. . . characterized primarily by two attitudes. On the one hand, there is the tradition of a romantic academicism, with its classical pomposity, its artificial and affected declamations of crescendos, diminuendos, etc.; intellectual molds that address themselves to no human realities, no vital truths and no needs of the modern theatre. On the other hand, there is the boulevard theatre with its familiar cliché

mannerisms, curtsies and smiles. A good actor is an actor who performs naturally, fashionably, and with ease and charm. I admit that the technical proficiency demanded by this kind of theatre is not easily acquired, but to what purpose all this effort? Is it perhaps so we can learn how to eat intelligently, or how to change coats and furs, or how to feel drowsy and yawn properly? Because these plays surely don't express any meaning, they have no blood or soul, there's no rhythm and line in them for one to underscore. . . . At most, they can shape and mold a generation of deaf and intellectually handicapped people.⁵

Koun went on to describe the seemingly "natural performance" given by the actor of the boulevard theatre as "an exterior kind of naturalness derived only from a phenomenal and familiar reality."⁶ In contrast, the actors of the *Theatro Technis* were to strive for the expression of an inner and outer truth that relied as much on intuitive awareness as on phenomenal reality. The extent to which Koun believed in the necessity and importance of intuitive knowledge for artistic creativity was reflected also in his own methods as director. Asked if he programmed his work before going into a rehearsal Koun, whose artistic inspiration depended strongly on the dynamics of rehearsals, replied:

. . . It is impossible for me to program my work. I can't even think in that fashion. I work empirically and I am moved by what I see and hear. Only the living body, the voice, the word, and movement arouse my senses and guide me. Other than a general instinctive conception of form and rhythm, every detail is revealed in the course of the work. Nothing is based on a predesigned scheme. I believe very much in our inner strength and knowledge, on the things that we don't

⁵Ploritis, ed. Karolos Koun gia to theatro, pp. 28-29.

⁶Ibid.

know we know and don't even suspect, on a conscious level, of knowing.⁷

It is clear that with "our inner strength and knowledge" Koun was referring, as he did often throughout his life, to intuitive awareness which he regarded as an indispensable ingredient of the artist's creative imagination. Intuition, as it is commonly perceived, differs from acquired knowledge in that it is believed to be inherent in human nature; an extraordinary insight shared by all humanity but existing, more often than not, in a latent or poorly channeled state. If that is the case, Koun's entire career could be described as a search for the proper artistic framework within the theatre for the release and expression of intuitive perception. Believing that a discipline consisting of an unceasing quest for knowledge, artistic commitment, hard work, and the constant striving for perfection would provide the best results, he devised a strict regimen to which all members of the Theatro Technis had to abide in order to cultivate their artistic sensibilities and acquire the skill and knowledge of their art. It was a discipline designed to develop and maintain the highest possible artistic standards.

The finest example of such a regimen, of course, and the prototype for everyone to follow was Koun himself. In many ways he was his own finest creation, the human

⁷Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, p. 61.

embodiment of the Theatro Technis, a work in progress that never veered from its artistic credo. His lifelong and uncompromising devotion to the theatre, as well as his great capacity of risking everything for what he truly believed, consummated Koun's style and made him a paragon of artistic excellence and perfection. Aggelos Terzakis, commenting in 1959 on Koun's three-year tenure with the National Theatre observed that he "brought to the National Theatre the same [unblemished] artistic virtues" that he possessed when he first met him in the thirties:

. . . I don't remember his ever being indifferent, satisfied, relying on some professional routine--which, after all, possesses its own kind of wisdom. He gave me the impression that he was always ready to break out of his mold, lift the anchors, sail into the sea, battle with the ocean and allow himself to be shipwrecked. That's the way it is! Whoever does not accept within himself, from the beginning, the possibility of being shipwrecked does not go past the horizon. And there is another virtue that Koun possesses, an even more profound one: his refusal to deceive and secure success by inferior means; his uncompromising dignity and self respect; his fanatical devotion to his art. Whether we agree or disagree with Koun, there is one thing of which I am certain: he does not work with what he does not believe in. He has the pride of the faithful.⁸

Laudatory remarks such as the one above sound more appropriate to a memorial than to honor someone who, at the time, was very much alive and at the peak of his career. Such praise was lavished on Koun throughout his life. It was a tribute not only to his artistic achievements but also

⁸Theatro Technis, Karolos Koun, 25 chronia theatrou, p. 50.

to his passionate commitment to the theatre and his uncompromising adherence to his artistic values. Even some of his harshest critics who at times complained of the monotony of his aesthetic perceptions and stylistic approach--claiming that the uniformity of his style made all his productions look the same--could not deny that Koun was a resounding presence and force in Greek theatre.

By the mid 1950s the general state of Greek theatre had changed considerably since Koun's 1943 grim description of the two dominant trends of prose theatre quoted earlier. Past efforts at improving theatrical conditions (amongst which Koun and the Theatro Technis were a leading force) had established a momentum that began to manifest itself quite noticeably by the mid-fifties. There were major advancements in the area of production with new experimental theatre companies (many of them splinter groups of the National Theatre and the Theatro Technis) pursuing their own calling. There was a whole new generation of versatile actors whose creative and interpretive talents were able to cover a much wider range of dramatic works than they previously were capable of handling. The same was also true of directors, musicians and designers.

There was a sociological factor as well that contributed to the rapid development of Greek theatre following the German occupation and civil war. It was perhaps the most momentous social phenomenon in the

country's postwar history and it came in the form of a massive influx of people from rural areas to urban centers, and primarily Athens, in search of a better life. The social upheaval resulting from such a massive unsettlement of the country's population (exacerbated by the government's inability or unwillingness to deal with the enormous problems it created) became the chief source of Greece's postwar civil strife and political struggle and, inadvertently, provided the raw material for the new dramaturgy that was to emerge in Greece within just a few years. In more practical terms for the theatre, this sudden urbanization created a larger audience that required more theatre for its entertainment and diversion and inevitably, but on a smaller scale, a better kind of theatre.

Another important theatrical development of the 1950s was the establishment by the Greek government of the popular summer theatre festivals at the ancient theatres of Epidaurus and Herod Atticus. These festivals served not only as a means to reacquaint the Greeks, on a grand and monumental scale, with their cultural heritage, but also as a tourist attraction and a showcase on an international level of the country's enriched artistic resourcefulness. Nearly forty years later, these festivals have become a national convention and their success has been a major contributing factor in the reestablishment of a theatrical tradition in modern Greece. Furthermore, their increasing

popularity with the public has motivated the government on a national as well as local level to institute similar festivals in other parts of the country.

The extensive theatrical improvements of the 1950s were also encouraged by the economic recovery that followed the civil war. Although the political climate of the fifties was often tense and the "quality" of life subject to intense debate, the government was highly successful in arresting the runaway inflation of the 1940s, in raising the average per capita income and improving the country's overall living standards. The political system was democratic, albeit paranoid and distrustful at first, fragile at times and for many years not terribly tolerant, for obvious reasons, of the political left. Nonetheless, where democracy is even nominally tolerated so is the creative impulse of the artist. In terms of the theatre, that impulse began to manifest itself quite explicitly by the latter half the decade.

Most importantly, however, the fifties saw the growth of a conscious theatre audience. Although small in number compared to the general theatre-going public (which continued to patronize in throngs the boulevard theatres, the musical revues and the ever popular farsocomodities), this audience was strong enough to sustain a continuous and growing demand for the kind of theatre that met with the artistic standards set by Koun and the Teatro Technis. In

other words, it expressed needs that went beyond, as Koun himself put it, the "continuation of dinner jokes at the tavern or the continuation of the loosening-up in the soccer stadium."⁹ In an article published in 1962 in the theatre journal Theatro, Koun took note of that sophisticated public's existence and its importance vis-à-vis companies such as the Theatro Technis:

. . . A public has developed, and continues to develop in greater numbers, with strict spiritual and artistic standards. . . . It is up to us [the theatre community] to nourish it and make it grow regardless of the price we have to pay. . . . Because only the presence of this public makes possible the existence of theatre companies with objectives that are uncompromisingly artistic; theatre companies that will present the most praiseworthy of plays and where the new voices of the theatre will meet and be tested. Only the existence of this public can spark the right kind of ambition in the mind and soul of the young actor that will make him devote himself to his art and motivate him to search for greater creative ways by which to communicate it. This public will help him free himself from the lethargy of his inherited rashness, routine and egocentrism and to stand like a counterweight against the temptations of easy exposure and success, the effortless climb and dominance, and the worthless conquest of the unimportant. It will give him back his faith and respect for his art and his work.¹⁰

The renaissance of modern Greek theatre, which began with the founding of the Nea Skini and the Vasiliko Theatro at the turn of the century, was finally beginning to show signs of having taken root and indications that its long awaited arrival was now becoming a reality. It came as a result of a combination of factors and influences that

⁹Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to theatro, p. 55.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 44-45.

ranged from the cumulative effects of the country's tumultuous modern history, the tense sociopolitical climate of the times, the postwar economic recovery, the need for more theatre to meet the demands of an increasingly larger audience and the general public's enhanced theatrical sensibilities and awareness.

The most important confirmation of this renaissance and perhaps the most significant theatrical development to take root in the fifties was the appearance, in the latter part of the decade, of a new generation of Greek playwrights whose creative output, to the present day, is regarded as the most innovative and inventive of modern Greek dramaturgy. Although not alienated or estranged from their roots and culture, these young playwrights (who are often referred to as the "Generation of the Sixties" and whose work is still too recent to be put into a full historical perspective) seem to have broken the old molds--native or borrowed--and to have found new, indigenous ways to "hold the mirror up to Nature." In a sense they are the first generation of playwrights in the country's modern existence to reach a kind of creative maturity, for they have come closer than any of their predecessors (if not being the first) in capturing the spirit of life truly endemic to modern Greece.

Their work differs also from anything previously written in that it doesn't strive simply to copy or emulate

but attempts to create its own premises and dares to expose and question. Influenced strongly by postwar American dramatists (Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge,) they turned their attention, with an articulate domestic flair, to the ills of the cultural materialism of their day and to the diverse sociopolitical forces that have shaped and conditioned the quality of modern Greek life. If life (Nature) is to be considered the force that unavoidably dictates the structure, content, and style of dramatic expression (based on the dictum that "art imitates nature"), then for the first time a group of Greek playwrights was able to go beyond life's rudimentary reflection to reveal with penetrating insight, clarity and often with considerable humor the existential disharmony in the life of their fellow countrymen and the conflict, pain and alienation it has caused in these modern times:

Amidst the desolation that followed the Second World War and the ensuing war in Greece, a handful of budding playwrights set out in search of the nation's and their own "new self." The dramatic art seemed to be the most appropriate vehicle to express the quest for the new identity, whereas up to that point poetry and prose had been the predominant genres. Since 1950 the theater--always a form of entertainment through which Greeks could "learn"--has attacked the average man's ignorance and complacency, his faded ideals, his alienation, his self-annihilating struggle to join the establishment, his nearly lost battle with technology. In this way it has assisted the individual in acquiring a degree of self-knowledge necessary for an evaluation of the human condition in the new situation of postwar Greece.¹¹

¹¹Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, p. 7.

No one has done more to encourage and nurture this "budding" generation of Greek playwrights than Koun and the Teatro Technis. His artistic record, until the time of his death, is a living testimony of his immeasurable contribution to the advancement of many, if not most, of those dramatists who are now identified with that generation. A large number of them have publicly acknowledged the enormous influence, either direct or indirect, that Koun and the Teatro Technis have exercised on them. In her book Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, Aliki Bacopoulou-Halls, gives credit to Koun's immense contribution to modern Greek theatre and the role model that the Teatro Technis has been to many striving artists of the theatre since the end of World War II. In her discussion of what she defines as Greece's "postmodern" dramatists she states that:

Iakovos Kambanellis, chronologically the first of the postmodern generation, has repeatedly said in lectures and interviews that when he came back from the Mauthausen concentration camp at the end of World War II, the only worthwhile theater was to be found in the performances of the Art Theater. . . . Vasilis Ziogas, has said, "I started writing theater after a performance of a Chekhov play by the Art Theater." Demitris Kehaidis fondly recalls the days when, instead of devoting his time to his university studies, he went down to the dark basement of the small cyclical theater where the Art Theater performed. Loula Anagnostaki, who comes from Thessaloniki. . . . matured in the atmosphere of the Art Theater. . . . Pavlos Matessis believes that his roots are somewhere else but is, nevertheless, one of those whom Koun [sic] catered to as far as acquainting the Greek public with European and American drama is concerned (Interview, 3/17/77). One could go on with names and examples, but perhaps it is equally important to stress here that Koun's [sic]

theater slowly but steadily "educated" a public, through the production of foreign plays, to receive new forms and attitudes when the Greek playwrights finally started presenting their plays.¹²

During his three years as guest director of the Greek National Theatre, Koun did not let go of the fundamental idea behind the Theatro Technis as art theatre--"the cultural regeneration of the people through the art of the theatre"--and the many artistic objectives that had led him to create the company in 1942. Although the company itself had officially disbanded in 1950, the essence of the Theatro Technis remained alive through its school which continued to operate uninterruptedly. Under the guidance and supervision of Koun himself, the school was reorganized with an entirely new group of students who had to submit themselves to the same kind of rigorous and demanding training as previous members of the company had in the past. There was no doubt in Koun's mind that the disbandment of the Theatro Technis was temporary and that, under favorable conditions, it would return one day to the stage. When those conditions were finally met in 1954 and the Theatro Technis resumed operations, most of the actors featured in the new company were graduates of that school.

As in 1933 and 1942, Koun had the advantage of starting, once again, with a clean slate. The Theatro Technis's three year inactivity allowed him as he himself

¹²Ibid., p. 108.

has put it, to "reshape from the beginning a new foundation" for the company. It was another return to the fundamentals of the theatre which, in the case of the Theatro Technis, had been clouded by the company's financial hardships, the political and social climate of the late forties, and by 1950, the inability to fend off the snares of commercialization. It was a time needed to redefine and strengthen the Theatro Technis's artistic objectives, to reinforce some of the ideals upon which it was originally conceived and to re-train a group of actors to meet the standards of excellence required by those ideals.

Another advantage of Koun's three-year sabbatical from the Theatro Technis was the opportunity to settle the large debts the company had incurred by the time of its disbandment. At the end of the third year, however, Koun had fulfilled all his obligations to his debtors, and with his acting students eager to assume their professional calling, the time had come for him to return, once again, to something more attuned to his artistic temperament and desires. The Theatro Technis, with the financial backing of the reestablished "Association of the Friends of the Theatro Technis," was now ready to resurface as a company and resume its active participation in the theatre of Greece. That fateful day occurred in a makeshift setup in the fall of 1954 at the basement of the movie theatre Orpheas, in the center of Athens, in the presence of about one hundred

spectators. That basement, which Koun and his students renovated with the help of a few generous backers, has come to be known as the "cyclical theatre" because of its arena shape and has remained to the present the headquarters of the Theatro Technis.

The play chosen to commemorate the return of the Theatro Technis to the stage was Thornton Wilder's allegorical drama Our Town. That in turn was followed by another Wilder play, The Skin of Our Teeth. Both productions were enthusiastically greeted by the press and the small public that attended them, giving the Theatro Technis the necessary moral support and psychological encouragement it needed as it reembarked on its "mission." Writing for the daily Kathimerini, Aimilios Chourmozios, who was moved beyond his expectations by the cast's superb ensemble playing, had only words of praise for the production of Our Town:

. . . The students of the dramatic school of the Theatro Technis have taken away from us the right to call them students. They are actors who have no reason to be envious of their very experienced professional colleagues. They have succeeded in presenting us a faultless whole that showed no signs of weakness, always maintaining a tonal uniformity in their acting that is due without doubt to their teacher. Truly Karolos Koun is a remarkable man. He is, perhaps, the only one of our directors who succeeds in creating actors. I admit that I went to the performance of the dramatic school with serious doubts. I expected to see an amateur production, albeit appropriately mounted and satisfactory, and talents in a state of incubation. Instead, I saw talents in their full blossoming and a production expected of the finest professional theatre company.¹³

¹³Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

Koun's choice of two American plays to launch the new company was due to his high regard for contemporary American theatre, which he considered extremely vital and highly influential on an international scale and a healthy, sound model for aspiring Greek playwrights to follow. In a newspaper interview given in 1957 while on tour with the Theatro Technis in the north of Greece, Koun addressed his inclination towards American drama when asked by the interviewer (name not provided) to express his views on modern theatre, its dominant trends and the countries that lead the way:

I think that we must first talk about the American theatre which seems to be holding the lead. From O'Neill onwards, the theatre of the United States entered into its mature age. First there was the Theatre Group with Clifford Odets, which faithfully followed the example set by Stanislavski. Later on, in other words today, came the triad of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder which has brought the American theatre to the front ranks. I believe that the American school (which also has at its disposal Saroyan, Inge, etc.) could be defined as realistic poetic theatre. The reasons for the blossoming of the theatre in America must be found in the fact that there are many schools which, along with other lessons, offer instruction in play-writing. The American playwrights that we mentioned above have, of course, studied in those schools. One could also say of the American theatre that it follows Stanislavski, not blindly, but only after it has enriched him with the particular character and idiosyncracies of American life.¹⁴

Speaking in the same interview of other countries whose theatre had had an international reputation and a

¹⁴Drasis (Thesaloniki), "O Karolos Koun omilei dia to neon theatron" [Karolos Koun talks about the new theatre," 24 June 1957.

strong influence on him, he mentioned various playwrights from England, France, Italy and Germany that he respected and admired such as T. S. Eliot, Terence Rattigan, Sartre, Anouilh, Ionesco, Beckett, Eduardo de Filippo, Ugo Betti and Brecht. But he went on to say that so far none of these countries offered a well-defined "school of theatre" such is found in the United States. What Koun saw in the American "school" was the most complete incorporation and assimilation of Stanislavski's teachings (the search for that illusive "inner truth," as in the work of the Actors Studio) which was for the Americans essentially an extension of the fundamentals set down by the Group Theatre twenty five years earlier.

Thus Koun continued in the fifties, as he had done in the second half of the previous decade, to look towards that postwar American "modified realism" for his theatrical style and for the prototypes on which young Greek dramatists could model their work. Stylistically, American postwar realism, where the rendering of "reality" had shifted from a purely illusionistic, representational approach to a more personal "artistic" interpretation, was more attuned to Koun's aesthetic needs and more in line with his ideal type of theatre which he called "Poetic Realism." Moreover, American drama, which often dealt with the problems of the modern individual in the throes of a cruel and unjust materialistic world (particularly in the works of Miller and

Williams), met the needs of the Greeks more closely at the time than the work coming from any other country.

As for modern Greek theatre, speaking in that same interview Koun expressed feelings of hope and optimism about the future. Although the political climate and the prevailing social conditions left much to be desired, Greek theatre was finally coming to grips with itself:

I believe that we are very close to a new blossoming of our theatre. Kechaïdis, whose two one-act plays we presented in Athens [1956-57 season] has a lot of talent. His plays offer poetry, are tightly knit and have a solid voice. He is only twenty years old but one can discern in his plays the influence of Tennessee Williams. Iakovos Kambanellis and Notis Pergialis are also two gifted playwrights who have a lot to offer.¹⁵

Koun's words were prophetic, for within a few months he would stage Kambanellis's play The Court of Miracles and raise a milestone in the development of modern Greek theatre. Dimitris Kechaïdis, who remained under the aegis of Koun and the Theatro Technis for many years, was indeed very young at the time; his more mature work was not to make itself felt until the following decade. Notis Pergialis was already an established dramatist whose work was heavily inspired by the theatre and poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca (Lorca had been an important literary and dramatic influence on the Greeks since the 1940s). His work is brimming with symbol and lyricism, and his subjects are drawn primarily from the country's rural sector or from the

¹⁵ Ibid.

ranks of the socially and economically disadvantaged. Despite his declared admiration for Pergialis, however, Koun never staged any of his plays. The reason, perhaps, was that his work, like that of so many other established dramatists of the time, would soon seem outdated and old-fashioned compared to the work written by that new generation of Greek playwrights that was shortly to emerge and open a new chapter on modern Greek theatre.

Koun's historic staging of Kambanellis's The Court of Miracles took place on December 1957, during the fourth season of the reestablished Theatro Technis. In the three years preceding that production, his work had concentrated primarily on the introduction of new and outstanding foreign plays but also included several revivals, a dabbling with Shakespeare (Twelfth Night), and a return to ancient Greek drama (Aristophanes Plutus) which will be discussed later, in the chapter dealing with the Theatro Technis and ancient theatre. As for modern Greek drama, his repertory remained alarmingly limited at the time, comprising in its entirety to the two one-act plays by Kechaïdis mentioned earlier. His revivals consisted of Lorca's Blood Wedding and Ibsen's The Wild Duck, which were staged by the Theatro Technis in the early forties, and Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, first staged in 1939 (two years before the founding of the Theatro Technis) at a time when Koun was just beginning to establish his reputation with the general public as an

important and promising new director. From the international repertory he introduced works by Thornton Wilder, Pirandello, Jean Paul Sartre, Wolf Mankowitz, Tennessee Williams, Sean O'Casey, John Patrick, William Inge, Arthur Miller, Bertold Brecht and Graham Green.

In spite of his generous and exemplary repertory, fears were beginning to mount that Koun and the Theatro Technis were becoming more and more disinterested in modern Greek drama. Those fears were not unjustified in view of the company's repertory during the three seasons (1954-57) preceding the production of The Court of Miracles, which had consisted in its entirety of twenty-eight foreign plays (fourteen full length and fifteen one-act plays), one ancient Greek comedy and only two one-act Greek plays. If there were any doubts, however, regarding the Theatro Technis's role in the future of modern Greek theatre, they were soon to be dispelled with the company's production of The Court of Miracles during the 1957-58 season. Apart from being an extraordinary artistic success and a resounding box office hit, it also signaled the beginning of a new era in modern Greek dramaturgy.

Iakovos Kambanellis, the author of The Court of Miracles, was born in 1922 in the island of Naxos. At the age of twenty he was taken prisoner by the Germans and was incarcerated for two and a half years at the concentration camp of Mauthausen in Austria. He was released in 1945 and

returned to Athens with the intentions of becoming an actor. Thwarted by his lack of a high school diploma, he was unable to gain admittance into the city's drama schools and his dreams for an acting career were quickly put to rest. Fortunately for posterity, however, Kambanellis was able to sublimate his desires for the limelight into writing for the stage, which in the long run has more than adequately compensated for his unsuccessful bid as an actor. Shortly after his return to Athens from the concentration camp, Kambanellis also became acquainted with the work of Koun and the Theatro Technis (1945-46 theatrical season) which, as he himself has repeatedly admitted, played a significant role in motivating him to write for the theatre:

. . . My collaborative acquaintance with Karolos Koun, the time that I discovered the great Koun--although I had met him earlier on several occasions--was between '55 and '57. Before that, I had become enchanted, literally enraptured, by his productions which revealed a measure of his greatness. Actually it happened with the very first production I saw of his, around '45 and '46, which I would venture to say sealed my fate and led me to the theatre.¹⁶

Kambanellis's dramatic output from the forties to the present has been extremely prolific. His first plays, written prior to 1956, were unconventional, highly satirical and painted a frenzied world that bordered on the insane. Interesting as they were, however, these plays met with consistent rejection and were rarely staged. Gorilla and

¹⁶ Iakovos Kambanellis, "Aisthisiakos kai viomatikos" [Sensuous and full of life], I Lexi 62 (February-March 1987): 180.

Ortansia, for example, was one of the few plays of that cycle to be produced but, to use the author's words, "it was massacred by the critics and the public did not accept it." Seeing that his work would not reach the stage if he continued to write in this vein, Kambanellis decided to employ for a period of time a more conventional (realistic) approach to expound his themes (as Ibsen had done a century earlier with the well-made-play), using the available dramatic form of urban melodrama, ever popular but lacking in substance. He began with The Seventh day of Creation (1956) which was immediately presented by the second company of the Greek National Theatre and proved an important success for its author. That play was soon followed by The Court of Miracles (1957), staged by the Theatro Technis, and two years later came The Age of Night (1959), also staged by the Theatro Technis. These three dramas represent a new cycle in Kambanellis's dramatic output and together comprise a kind of trilogy dealing with the plight of the Athenian city dweller and his struggle to maintain his human dignity amidst a world that seems invariably to conspire to undermine it. Although each play focuses on a different sector of the city's population, the characters of all three plays share a kind of existential restlessness, a common denominator that links them together:

. . . The common feature [between the three plays] is a deeper relationship that rises out of the characters' conflicts which, since they live in the same land and face the same social conditions, cannot but be the same.

The relationship lies in the one essential dramatic center to which I return with vigor, almost without meaning to, every time: the effort for the attainment of an inner and outer independence; a rebellion for the finding of a way out. And all that, weaved with a tragic wish for personal creation.¹⁷

If The Seventh day of Creation was an artistic triumph The Court of Miracles, as staged by Koun and the Theatro Technis, created a sensation. It played for an unprecedented one hundred and sixty five performances, and when it was over modern Greek theatre had changed. On the surface the play is similar in structure and form to the many folkloric urban melodramas that had been written ever since Xenopoulos popularized the genre at the turn of the century (the Greeks call it ithographia, meaning a description of the customs and manners of a people). Even the characters and the setting were familiar, drawn from that impoverished peasant class that had flocked to Athens from all parts of the country and changed the capital from a small city to an overcrowded metropolis. So perfect in fact was The Court of Miracles as an urban melodrama that one may venture to claim, without exaggeration, that as the consummate example of its kind it rendered the genre obsolete and marked the end of an era:

Parallel [to the Theatro Technis] the works of Kambanellis illuminated new subjects or abolished old ones by completing them. The example is The Court of

¹⁷Iakovos Kambanellis, Iakovos Kambanellis, Theatro, 3 vols. (Athens: Kethros 1978), 1:191.

Miracles which is not only a classic modern Greek play and a thoroughly authentic reflection of an aspect of Greek life, but also the last which mirrors the peasant neighborhood, particularly the Athenian courtyard with all its mythology. Kambanellis's Court with all its perfection has stood like a forbidding landmark to other playwrights. Whatever would be written in that vein after The Court of Miracles would be simple imitation--and that is why it wasn't written. . . .¹⁸

Bacopoulou-Halls, in her study of the postwar Greek dramatists, reiterates the same point:

The Court of Miracles, presented for the first time in 1957 by the Art Theater, marked a turning point in modern Greek dramaturgy because it constituted the necessary requiem for an era that had irrevocably passed and provided an introspective look into Greek reality.¹⁹

Years later, in the program note of a new production of the play by the Theatro Technis (1975-76), Kambanellis himself described The Court of Miracles in retrospect as a play that "was the swan song of a world deeply our own and deeply embittered."²⁰

But if The Court of Miracles marked the end of an era in Greek theatre, it also signaled the beginning of a new one. Although the form and structure of the play was the same as that of the traditional melodrama, the subject matter was approached and treated in a fresh and innovative way. The playwright did not strive to reflect the human

¹⁸Giorgos Michailidis, Neoi Ellines theatriki syggrafeis [Modern Greek playwrights] (Athens: Kaktos 1975), p. 16.

¹⁹Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, p.114.

²⁰Kambanellis, Iakovos Kambanellis Theatro, 1:93.

condition of his subjects in the simple pseudo-romantic manner of the past, as seen through a collection of stock characters and intended for the public's passive consumption. Instead, Kambanellis sought to instill the play's *dramatis personae* with the yearning of the Greek people for a better life and their struggle for integrity in a world that offered little hope for improvement. He succeeded in capturing a glimpse of their longings, ambitions, restlessness, pain, and humor as well as the existential anguish that prevailed among the Greeks in the 1950s, following the earth-shattering upheavals of the previous decade that had invalidated so many of the country's (indeed the world's) moral, social and spiritual values. The play, like the one that preceded it and the one that followed it, focused on contemporary life but not out of the context of geographical conditions that have nurtured it and the historical, sociopolitical and cultural circumstances that had shaped it. Although familiar to all, the play's characters were three-dimensional human beings, intricately developed, psychologically motivated and imbued with conflicts that touched the lives of almost every Greek. In the program note of the 1957-58 production of the play by the Theatro Technis, Kambanellis tried to elucidate his aims in writing The Court of Miracles:

If I were asked what I wanted as an author, I would say: "To write works whose origins are, as much as possible, the most authentic of our land." And if they asked me again what is my ambition in the theatre, I

would say that I wanted, with a series of theatrical works, to discover the Greek as a contemporary human being. What I mean to say is, to discover the characteristics of my countrymen and of my times from the temporary expression of their relationship with today's social reality.

The Court of Miracles is based on the lack of stability and security which characterizes the life of the Greek. This unsteadiness, so familiar to all of us, begins with our unpredictable climate, our "strategic" geographical placing, the poverty of our land, and ends with our private economic status. Everything in Greece swings up and down very easily, floats away, leaves, while the habitual yearning of the Greek remains to anchor somewhere, to find security in something.

The peasant class expresses with greater sincerity life's attributes and for that reason it is not by chance that I place the play in its milieu.²¹

Thus, in The Court of Miracles, Kambanellis aimed at revealing the existential condition of the modern Greek by probing into the life of the impoverished but spirited lower middle class of Athens that comprised the bulk of the city's population. Moreover, Kambanellis wanted to show the human side and complexity of his characters pitted against a hostile and inhuman world, who up to now had been either deliberately ignored--as the frightening "faceless masses"--or represented in the most stereotypical fashion. The other two plays of this undeclared trilogy about modern Greek life treat the same themes as seen through different classes of the social strata.

Koun staged three more plays by Kambanellis in the course of the years, Odysseus Come Home (1966), four

²¹Ibid., 1:93.

sketches under the title Characters for Violin and Orchestra (1975) and The Table's Four Legs (1978). Although these plays did not share in the historic significance of The Court of Miracles, they were very favorably received by both critics and public. Kambanellis's style in the plays he wrote following his celebrated trilogy is different and in many ways seems to revert to the less representational and psychological style of his work prior to the trilogy. The focus, however, in all his plays continued to be contemporary Greece and the many difficulties and predicaments faced by the Greeks as they struggle to find meaning and truth in their lives. It is that focus in Kambanellis's work that has led Kostas Georgousopoulos, a leading theatre critic in Greece of the past two decades, to observe that "essentially" the central hero in all of Kambanellis's works is the "common Greek":

. . . contradictory, dreamer, trickster, disappointed, beaten, cheated, proud, enthusiastic, gullible and always betrayed. . . .

Mr. Kambanellis has discovered one hero whom he has sent traveling in modern Greek reality. He isolates the historical setting that interests him, establishes the social conditions and abandons his hero satisfied in simply describing his movements and reactions. This is true popular, realistic theatre and the contribution of Mr. Kambanellis to that genre is invaluable.²²

The next important Greek playwright to be featured by Koun, following the success of The Court of Miracles, was Dimitris Kechaïdis. Kechaïdis had come to the public's

²²Kostas Georgousopoulos, To Vima (Athens), 28 January 1976.

attention for the first time during the Theatro Technis's 1956-57 season with his two one-act plays, A Distant Sad Song and Games in the Salt Mines. Both plays were the dramatist's first attempt at playwriting and were inspired, as he himself has admitted, by the Theatro Technis's previous season's production of a series of one-act plays by Tennessee Williams:

Until 195... [sic] the theatre did not interest me in any particular way. The few times that I had happened to go to the theatre I was not very fortunate. I fell upon some bombastic and stylized productions that left me empty and indifferent. . . . Thus, when one night in November of 195... [sic] a friend, who had two tickets for the Theatro Technis, asked me to go with him I did not respond with enthusiasm. I finally agreed to go only because the title of the play made an impression on my youthful sensibilities. The program was composed of five one-act plays by Tennessee Williams under the general title Speak to Me Like the Rain. How revelatory that production was to me (my first contact with the truth and magic of Koun's work) is indicated by the fact that within two months I wrote and delivered to him my first one-act plays A Distant Sad Song and Games in the Salt Mines²³.

The production of Kechaïdis's two one-act plays by the Theatro Technis went relatively unnoticed. In retrospect the two dramas seem like a youthful exercise in psychological theatre using Tennessee Williams as a model. Although the plays are inferior to the dramatist's mature work, they did foreshadow some of the characteristics of his later plays, particularly the conflict between illusion and reality which became the constant theme in Kechaïdis's

²³Dimitris Kechaïdis, "Theteia" [The apprenticeship], in Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

dramas. Although the struggle of illusion versus reality is one of life's archetypal conflicts, it had a special relevance for the Greeks as a metaphor for the country's emotional state since its independence. It was the result of the great and sometimes insurmountable difficulties faced by the Greeks in their efforts, after four hundred years of Ottoman rule, to redefine their identity (their Greekness)--as a national entity--and to justify their existence within the proper political, social and cultural context.

Kechaïdis raised this conflict to symbolic status in such works as The Long Stroll (1959), The Suburb of New Phaliro (1960), The Feast (1964), The Wedding Ring and Backgammon (1972), and Laurels and Bitter Laurels (1979). The characters in all these works scheme, struggle and hope for that one thing that will change their lives for the better. The world in which they live, however, is unresponsive to their needs and in the end their only alternative is either to go on dreaming and scheming or acquiesce to a kind of unbearable and suffocating reality. Like most Greeks, Kechaïdis's characters are incorrigible optimists who, rather than take that sobering leap into reality, prefer to live with their fantasies, wrapped up in their dreams and illusions, while plotting, like prisoners, their great escape. There is also a third alternative--perhaps the most "pragmatic" in terms of getting what one wants in this particular world--which is the selling of

oneself for material gains and social advancement. That is another recurring theme in Kechaïdis's plays and a common subject in all dramatic literature where poverty is an invisible protagonist. A fourth alternative would be to change the world, but that is left up to the audience and not the characters in the plays.

With the exception of The Suburb of New Phaliro, all of Kechaïdis's plays mentioned above were staged by Koun and the Theatro Technis. Most of the productions were received with relative enthusiasm by the public and the press, whereas two of them have been singled out as milestones in the development of modern Greek drama. The first one was the production of his two one-act plays The Wedding Ring and Backgammon presented in 1972, together with works by two other important Greek playwrights (Loula Anagnostaki and Giorgos Skourtis), in celebration of the Theatro Technis's thirty year anniversary. In his review for the newspaper To Vima, Kostas Georgousopoulos praised unreservedly Koun and the Theatro Technis for their superb production of both plays and described Kechaïdis as a "master" of his profession and his two plays as "only the second step taken by our theatre since The Court of Miracles" (the first step being, according to Georgousopoulos, Vasilis Ziogas who joined the ranks of the great "pioneers" of modern Greek drama with his play Antigone's Matchmaking written in 1958 and first produced in 1960):

The Wedding Ring and Backgammon are not just the titles of two one-act plays committed to the myth of his [Kechaïdis's] work but two plays that have successfully evolved into two symbols of modern Greek metaphysics. Out of two familiar stories, recognizable and common, emerged the roots of a people that have greatly suffered in their efforts to persevere and survive. There is no mercy, no pity, no fancy words. He presents the Greek not with a scalpel (Mr. Kechaïdis does not write satire) but with perception and great sensibility. Not Greek life (he does not write social theatre), but the Greek, as he is and as he seems to be. And yet it is not naturalism, not even realism and surely not that diluted form: "poetic realism." It is theatre, pure and simple; the reflection of human conditions.²⁴

Laurels and Bitter Laurels, a scathing political satire devoid of the familiar trappings of partisan ideology, was staged by the Theatro Technis under Koun's direction in November of 1979. The public and critical response for the production, the play and its author was once again one of unanimous praise. Georgousopoulos called the play a "theatrical masterpiece" and concluded his review of the production with the words: "modern Greek theatre advances with giant steps."²⁵ Thodoros Criticos of the newspaper Proïni pointed out that:

Rarely has an author with such a limited dramatic output exercised such an enormous influence around him [in twenty five years Kechaïdis wrote only about ten plays]. The most recent generation of our country's

²⁴Kostas Georgousopoulos, Kleidia kai kodikes theatrou [Keys and codes of the theatre], 2 vols. (Athens: Hestia, 1964) 2:46-47.

²⁵Ibid., p. 298.

dramatists has taken as its starting point, almost in its entirety, the accomplishments of Kechaïdis.²⁶

Loula Anagnostaki is another dramatist who belongs, along with Kechaïdis, to what is now referred to as the "generation of the sixties." Her plays are permeated with that existential anguish shared by many of her peers but her view of the world is probably the most pessimistic of all. Hers is an inhuman, violent, corrupt and oppressive world that constantly erupts in grotesque forms and violence. Reality is a nightmare. Her characters (the common man) are always under the threat of something beyond them. Fate is in the hands of others. These are the antiheroes, perpetual victims living in uncertainty, never quite understanding what is happening to them. They are always in fear that something evil is about to happen to them and as a result of that anticipation they become neurotics and suffer from delusions and persecution complexes. They are products of a time that has flouted normal logic.

Anagnostaki's career as a playwright was launched in the spring of 1965 with the production of her first three one-act plays (The Overnight Stop, The City, and The Parade) by the Theatro Technis under the general title The City. A kind of Kafkaesque irrationality and despair dominates all three works. Their world is that of the unfeeling powerful

²⁶Dimitris Kechaïdis and Eleni Chaviara, Daphnes kai picrodaphnes [Laurels and bitter laurels] (Athens: Ermis, 1980), backcover.

and their agents where, beneath a dreadful and senseless life's routine, lurks the threat of violence and barbarism:

. . . In these plays the characters search desperately, in dreams and in reality, for the "home," the "city" in which they might recognize themselves, but each time they are disillusioned because either the dream turns into a grotesque nightmare or the real city seems identical to the ones they have previously visited. In Overnight Stop and The City (1965) the temporary nature of the abode is especially stressed, mainly through the fact that the characters retreat to their rented premises as fugitives of a merciless but unknown threat.²⁷

The City was presented together with Kechaïdis's The Feast and Giorgio Sevasticioglou's Aggela. All three works were premiered by the Theatro Technis during its 1964-65 theatre season in celebration of its ten year anniversary since the company resettled in the Orpheas theatre in 1954 and resumed operations. Koun felt the best way to honor such an occasion would be through a festival of modern Greek plays. The response of the critics was not favorable nor encouraging but neither was it totally unexpected. The standard attitude of theatre critics towards modern Greek theatre, of which Koun was very well aware, had always vacillated between two contrasting poles. On the one hand, they bitterly lashed out at directors and theatre companies for not producing enough modern Greek theatre, while, on the other hand, they lashed out even more bitterly and insensitively when plays by young Greek dramatists were

²⁷Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, p. 145.

produced. That attitude was both frustrating and destructive, and intimidated the growth and development of the new generation of dramatists. In a newspaper interview in January of 1965 Koun took the opportunity to reiterate one of the Theatro Technis's fundamental responsibilities, to defend the plays of Anagnostaki and Kechaïdis, which were "chosen out of hundreds submitted," and to give vent to some of his feelings towards the critics:

One of the basic objectives of the Theatro Technis is to feature modern Greek playwrights. We have to help create the new playwrights. That is why we undertook this season to present, almost exclusively, Greek works. . . . We knew in advance that we would not profit at the box office because to present new Greek dramatists is often a risky business. But, we decided to go ahead with our plans because we believed we had a duty towards Greek theatre. Other influences of the theatrical life of our country, however, like the critics for example, did not see it as their duty to support the modern Greek play. Personally I feel that the playwrights presented by the Theatro Technis this season, particularly Kechaïdis in whom I have great faith, deserved better treatment and better luck. That "better luck" could have come from the critics, and the press in general, had they been more supportive. In other words, instead of focusing only on the plays' flaws, which is natural for these plays to have, they should have concentrated more on their virtues. During a round-table discussion on the radio some time ago, I pointed out that while there is a ceaseless clamor that we don't produce Greek plays, when we do dare to feature new Greek dramatists we are given a cold and hard reception often by the very same people who were doing all the yelling and screaming. Therefore we must decide some day whether we seriously want new Greek dramatists or not.²⁸

Despite the poor critical response that greeted all three productions, which also had an adverse reaction on

²⁸Giorgos Pilichos, Ta Nea (Athens), 25 January 1965.

the public's attendance of the plays, both Kechaïdis and Anagnostaki have earned the recognition they deserve and taken their place in the pantheon of modern Greek playwrights. Sevasticoglou, although newly returned to the Greek stage, was not a "new kid on the block." He had been Koun's protege when the Theatro Technis was founded in 1942 and his first play, Constantine's and Helen's, was staged by Koun during the Theatro Technis's very first season. Following the civil war, however, Sevasticoglou left the country for political reasons and went into voluntary exile to the Soviet Union where he pursued a successful career as a dramatist and screen writer. He had several of his plays produced in the Soviet Union, including some at the renowned Vakhtangov Theatre, as well as in other countries of the Eastern Block. Political enmities did not allow Sevasticoglou's work to be staged in Greece until Koun's production of Aggela in 1964. But even that was not done without a storm of controversy as advocates of the political right demanded that the play be banned from production in view of its author's political inclinations and lengthy sojourn in the Soviet Union.

Anagnostaki was featured several more times by the Theatro Technis, under Koun's direction (by the mid sixties other members of the Theatro Technis began to direct), with such works as Antonio or the Message (1972), The Victory (1977), The Cassette (1982), and The Sound of the Weapon

(1986) which was also the last play Koun would direct prior to his death. There is a maturity in both form and content in the progress of Anagnostaki's work which reaches its apogee with The Victory and The Cassette. Beside their literary and dramaturgical merits, both plays also triumphed on the stage. Although the Kafkaesque, nightmarish world persists, it is softened by glimpses of hope that come from the "existential" realization that human life is not the helpless plaything of outside forces (Greece versus a history of foreign interference) but possesses "will" and can make decisions for itself. This is an important step in the process of self awareness, for it frees one from the perpetual state of victimization. Bacopoulou-Halls calls The Victory "a turning point in postmodern Greek theater," claiming that Anagnostakis:

. . . accepts the Nothingness of human existence. . . [and] asserts the prerogative of the individual to commit a decisive act--even if negative--which will justify his being. The recognition of one's claim to this unique characteristic or act is a great step towards self-knowledge, and this in turn leads towards a state where man can scorn his fate which cannot deprive him of his freedom if he is not willing to relinquish it.²⁹

Georgousopoulos praised The Victory as Anagnostakis's encapsulation of modern Greek history showing "all the guilt of the postwar Greek, the defeat and the no exit of defeat," and went on to describe the play as a

²⁹Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, p.146.

"tragedy of defeat."³⁰ The Cassette, on the other hand, which he called in his review of the play "the most perfect dramatic work of the last twenty five years," he saw as the wasteland where there is no meaning, no logic and no order. As for Koun's production of The Cassette he described it as:

. . . an almost perfect production. Only he [Koun], who essentially suckled modern Greek dramaturgy and modern Greek acting, who ripened with the plays and the plays ripened with his aesthetic conquests, could perceive the new perspective opened by Anagnostaki. . . .

It was big moment for our theatre.³¹

Giorgos Skourtis was yet another playwright belonging to the "generation of the sixties" that was nurtured by the Theatro Technis. His first play, The nannies, was staged in 1970 by Giorgos Lazanis, the company's leading actor, who also became Koun's successor as artistic director of the Theatro Technis in 1987. Other plays by Skourtis produced by the Theatro Technis were The musicians (1972), as part of the company's thirty year anniversary, Karagiozis Almost Vizier (1973), and Bits and Pieces (1976). With the exception of The Nannies, all of the above plays were directed by Koun.

If Skourtis's work is to be characterized by one word it would be "didactic," not in the pompous, pedantic sense of the word, but in the tendency to want to teach and

³⁰Georgousopoulos, Kleidia kai kodikes theatrou 2:425-26.

³¹Ibid., 2:428.

inform as well as to please and entertain. He felt that the theatre had a "social" responsibility to try to provide tangible answers to the problems facing the Greeks and not offer abstract and conceptual responses that only obscured the issues further. His heroes are all variations of the same theme, the "common Greek": poor, powerless, oppressed, dreamer, optimistic, free in spirit. His sources, the national roots:

In any place and time, art is regenerated only by going back to the people, to the folk elements, to tradition, to history, to the collective conscience.³²

His characters are not psychologically developed or motivated. They are types, deliberately two dimensional (a direct influence of the Greek shadow theatre) and intended not for the public's emotional identification with them but to elicit its critical response:

People today desperately need a logical answer. They do not need an exposition but an analysis. They do not lack the tragic view but the critical one. Tragedy is inspired by slavery, criticism by freedom. I consider it more human, and socially more profitable to be preoccupied with the anguish of survival rather than with the anguish of death. The theater today has become anti-heroic. It gets its satisfaction out of epitaphs and requiems, and forgets the tom-toms and the trumpets.³³

Skourtis was very popular at times because his plays, in addition to their thoughtful underlying social criticism, are also very well constructed, highly satirical

³²Bacopoulou-Halls, Modern Greek Theater: Roots and Blossoms, p. 137.

³³Ibid., p. 138.

(almost burlesque at times) and reveal a superb command of language that is deeply rooted in Greek tradition and folk culture. Devoid of much of the existential anguish that characterized the work of many of his contemporaries, his plays aimed (and succeeded) at reaching a much wider audience, even if in the process the playwright occasionally fell out of favor with some of his critics.

There were many more playwrights that Koun and the Theatro Technis nurtured throughout the years, both directly and indirectly. The rise of the postwar dramatists is invariably linked with the Theatro Technis which not only encouraged and produced many of their plays, but also served as a model of artistic excellence that had far reaching effects in the country's artistic community. Although Kambanellis, Kechaïdis, Anagnostaki and Skourtis seem to comprise a kind of undeclared group of resident playwrights of the Theatro Technis, many more contemporary Greek dramatists saw their works staged by the company. The list includes such prominent names as Mitsos Efthimiadis, Kostas Mourselas, Marios Pondikas and Giorgos Armenis, among many others, all of whom are considered today among the top rank of Greek playwrights.

Kambanellis's success with The Court of Miracles in refocusing the center of dramatic attention on vital and as of yet unexplored issues, unearthed a wealth of dramatic material and opened the way for future dramatists. His

works were the first to touch on the existential predicament of the Greeks and their desperate need to redefine their identity following a generation of cataclysmic changes. The loss of identity implies the collapse of unity and objective reality. That collapse is strongly felt in the work of the Greek playwrights who followed Kambanellis, particularly those identified today as the "generation of the sixties."

Abandoning the familiar theatrical trappings and misconceptions of the past, these dramatists embarked on a search for new meanings by using every possible theatrical device available from Realism to the Theatre of the Absurd. Although the formal and stylistic characteristics of their work varies from playwright to playwright and sometimes from play to play, they are inevitably linked together through their break from the theatrical conventions of the past, their concern with modern man in a hostile environment, their search for identity in a confused and chaotic world and ultimately by being all a part of the same generation. Furthermore they all lived through a seven-year dictatorship (1967-74) which instead of undermining their creativity seemed to confirm many of the paranoias, fears, persecution complexes and bleak world-views expressed in their plays, making their work all the more relevant to the times and to the future.

It is important to note here that the work of Kambanellis and of the dramatists who followed him was not the result of a spontaneous and isolated stroke of creativity suddenly overcoming the country. Although much has been said about the lack of a consistent, indigenous theatrical tradition in Greece in modern times, it would be misleading to assume that what began to manifest itself in Greek theatre in the latter part of the fifties did not grow out of the efforts of the past. In fact, most of the playwrights of that generation and onwards have repeatedly acknowledged their indebtedness to the diverse influences of the past, be they foreign or domestic, that have shaped their work. What distinguishes their dramaturgy from anything previously written is an assimilation of these influences, coupled with a certain degree of self-knowledge and creative independence that enabled them to look at the world and particularly at Greek life without the help of models. In a sense, they are representative of a maturity in Greek theatre. After a long and difficult apprenticeship that exposed them to practically all the prevailing theatrical activity of modern times, they became masters of their craft and were now prepared and ready to create their own forms and structures to suit their dramatic needs.

Karolos Koun and the Theatro Technis were perhaps the single most instrumental force contributing to that maturity, and the debt owed them by contemporary Greek

status of father-figure among postwar Greek dramatists) in his entry to the 1987 February/March issue of the literary magazine I Lexi, which was dedicated in its entirety to Koun, following his death earlier that year:

. . . I believe that whatever is happening today in Greek theatre--in other words that we have many good theatre companies, repertory companies, that good theatre has made it to the provinces, that there are many talented directors--is the result of the Theatro Technis. I also believe that works staged by people who were not his [Koun's] students or by people who never knew Koun's work or even by people who didn't like his work, owe something to the explosion he caused. Koun as a creator cannot be bound by his productions or the work of the Theatro Technis. He is much greater than anything anyone can imagine. . . . Whatever we say about Koun is too little, for with the passage of time, while data that is either too early for anyone to remember or too soon to understand its value is gathered, his stature will grow greater and greater.³⁴

³⁴Iakovos Kambanellis, "Aisthisiakos kai viomatikos" I Lexi 62: 184.

CHAPTER V

THE THEATRO TECHNIS AND ANCIENT GREEK DRAMA

Ancient Greek theatre has endured the passage of time and has survived to the present with much of its original vigor and vitality intact. Today, the extant dramas of Antiquity's "Golden Age" are appreciated not as curious museum pieces of a bygone era but as vital works treating subjects and themes that are as relevant in the present as they were when they were first performed two and a half thousand years ago. Greek theatre is without doubt at the very core and foundation of Western theatre, and the development of European drama from ancient times to the present has been significantly influenced by Greek drama in terms of dramatic content and form.

Regardless of the universality of classical theatre and the timelessness of its themes, it has never been an easy task to bring it successfully to the stage. A great deal of creative and imaginative work is needed to make the nonrepresentational drama of the ancients come alive in an era where realism and representation have become the main

staple of the theatre. There are numerous problems facing the modern director that have long ceased to be a part of mainstream dramatic practice. The question of space, for example, is one such major problem. Ancient Greek theatre was intended to be performed in the presence of thousands of people in large, open-air amphitheaters. Today, with only few exceptions, one is obliged to recapture the same awe-inspiring grandeur experienced by the ancients on a much smaller scale. There is also the question of the chorus and how that seemingly obsolete but intrinsic component of ancient Greek drama can be used effectively today. Other important and often difficult issues to resolve in the staging of classical drama include the incorporation of dance and music into dramatic action, whether to use masks, like the ancients, to identify character and conceal the actor's personality, and how to best handle poetic language in an age of prose.

In 20th century Greece the answer to the question of how to interpret the works of Antiquity has come, as has often been the case in the country's artistic and literary disputes, from two opposing and often quarreling camps. On the one extreme, the literary and artistic conservatives, elitist in nature, classically oriented and always poised towards Western Europe for inspiration, have advocated "no modern, experimental tampering" with the works of the ancients, stressing the neoromantic ideal that to recapture

the majesty of ancient Greek drama, modern Greeks must strive to emulate their forefathers rather than try to interpret them. As noble and virtuous as this approach may sound in theory, it is based more on conjecture than actual knowledge, and in practice it has almost always resulted in grandiloquent, unimaginative productions devoid of any vitality or contemporary relevance. Most of these productions were sterile, academic attempts which Koun described as "soulless museum pieces." The reason lies in the fact that, in truth, the underlying aesthetic behind these productions was not inspired by any actual knowledge of how the ancients staged their dramas but by the 19th century "Weimar Classicism" of Goethe and Schiller, by the declamatory practices of the old Comédie-Française and more recently by the spectacle-oriented neo-romanticism of the Reinhardt school.

This displaced, pseudo-classicism was alien to the realities of modern life and the mediterranean disposition of the Greeks. Ultimately, this approach reflected the shortcomings of its adherents not only in understanding the spirit of classical theatre but also in understanding the dramatic needs of their contemporaries. Defending their position, however, these visionary romantics maintained with an almost ecclesiastical authority that the staging of ancient drama, particularly at such "venerable" sites as the ancient theatre of Epidaurus or the odeum of Herodes Atticus

in Athens, must be subject to certain irrefutable (although largely unfounded and never clearly established) guidelines. Deviating from these guidelines spelled heresy and has led to many a cry of "blasphemy," echoed by the self-appointed priests of Dionysus against the "desecrators" of classical drama. Koun shunned such self-righteousness that inevitably made ancient Greek theatre the privilege of an elite few:

I believe that the real desecration is that which limits the range of ancient Greek tragedy. For me Aeschylus is holy, but he is holy because he speaks to the entire world, to all the people. Therein lies his greatness. Something similar exists with Shakespeare and the English have fully understood that by making every possible effort to stage his plays as if they were contemporary works.

We must understand: our ancient poets do not exist in order to be read and explained by philologists. They exist to give their message to the whole world. When their plays were performed in Antiquity they were listened to and understood by the entire population which, as a result, became fuller and richer both intellectually and spiritually. This is after all the purpose of the theatre. If you try to limit this purpose then you become sacrilegious.¹

At the other extreme of the spectrum were the young, progressively minded "innovators," friends of the "common man" and rebels, who claimed to be more attuned to the times than their conservative, idealistic adversaries and therefore to possess a much greater understanding of the country's theatrical needs and sensibilities. Their approach reflected the artistic experimentalist of the twentieth century whose objective was the revitalization of

¹Tachydromos (Athens), 2 October 1976.

the arts through the application of new and original ideas and concepts. Theirs was also a politically charged approach, as they frequently tried to submit ancient Greek drama to the principles of modern political, economic, and social theories.

The experimentation, politicization and repeated flights of fancy of these artists, however, took them so overboard at times with their interpretations and adaptations, that the final result did not often merit the name of its original author. Lacking true theatrical experience and discipline, their sometimes imaginative and innovative efforts appeared reactionary as they struggled hurriedly to modernize ancient Greek theatre with haphazard means that aimed more at invalidating the tenets of their artistic adversaries than to create a genuine new aesthetic. As a result, their productions were usually erratic and lacked the passionate intensity associated with ancient Greek drama. Often they were perceived as irreverent and disrespectful. In general, they demonstrated, more than anything else, a lack of real knowledge, understanding and sometimes love of the material they were dealing with. Koun, who was all in favor of modernization and experimentation, did not appreciate hasty or poorly planned productions, particularly where ancient Greek theatre was concerned. Although he himself always took at least three

months to prepare a classical play for the stage he still felt it was not enough time:

As far as I am concerned, one criticism that should be made about my work is that it is impossible for a theatre group to arrive with only three months of preparations at all-around positive results. The work in this field requires a very long time to prepare because one of the most difficult things that must be recaptured is the emotional impact which can only be developed organically. In other words, the need does not lie solely in experimentation or the research done by the whole team. . . but in the training. Ancient drama contains sensibilities which today's actors are not accustomed to express. There are awesome swellings of passion as well as of the different means of expression required of this kind of theatre. Actors must be trained with the objective of developing these means of expression, be they of movement or of sound, in an organic way.²

With only few marginal exceptions, the staging of ancient Greek drama continued along those lines in Greece during the first half of the twentieth century, and the public had to content itself with either lifeless, academic productions or crude, haphazard innovations. The situation, however, began to change rapidly in the 1950s and sixties with the mainstream acceptance of a new generation of directors (Koun included) who were able to combine knowledge, innovation and a discerning awareness of the country's dramatic sensibilities and pursue a path that seemed to bridge the two opposing camps. Historically, these directors belong to the existentially troublesome but artistically fertile post war era that resulted from the

² Ibid.

country's rude awakening in the aftermath of World War II and the civil war that followed it.

In spite of their enormous contribution not only in helping to infuse new life into ancient Greek theatre but in fostering the development of modern Greek theatre in general, many of these young directors were often subjected to cruel and unwarranted criticism for their efforts, especially by those of the "old school" who felt the need to preserve at all costs the "dignity" (the academicism) of Attic tragedy and comedy. This negative, unjustified kind of criticism was widespread in modern Greece and was directed not only at those who attempted to revive classical theatre but at all artists who strove to break out of the old molds and create new forms:

. . . Many new forces, worthy of the theatre, were either lost, led astray or forced to follow less promising paths. Many new Greek playwrights and directors have suffered dearly at the hands of the critics. Many important foreign playwrights appearing for the first time, who are now international pinnacles of excellence, were censured mercilessly and mindlessly by the press. I could list countless names of actors, directors and Greek and foreign playwrights who received repeated critical assaults when they were first introduced.

Very often I sit and wonder and ask myself where this sourness and belligerent furor come from. Often I've tried to find the cause. Is it perhaps, in some, the desire to impose themselves, which is dictated, consciously or unconsciously, by this fearsome aggression? Is it perhaps a matter of self-preservation by the conventional or by the various cliques? Is it, in many, a willful shutting of their eyes which makes them unable to see as worthy something they have not put forth themselves? For forty years I've been thinking about this repeatedly and wondering about it.³

³Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 117-18.

Koun could never quite justify the furor and ruthlessness of modern Greek criticism and saw it as "fascism in its most intense form." As an artist he felt his temperament to be so totally different from that of the critics' that, "in general," he could not even "enter into dialogue" with them.⁴ This is not to say that Koun did not find usefulness and purpose in good criticism but it was rare and the critics of stature even rarer.

Fortunately the attacks of the critics, no matter how vicious and unwarranted, were not effective in stemming the new course being set by the theatre directors of the fifties and sixties. As far as ancient Greek drama was concerned, these directors came at a time when modern Greek theatre, weary of the specter of its glorious, distant past and distrustful of the self-proclaimed custodians of antiquity's splendor, turned to contemporary life and culture for its sources of inspiration in interpreting classical drama. Defying the blows of the opposition, many of these directors have pursued flourishing careers in the theatre and today are counted among the country's most esteemed members of their profession. The feud, however, between the adherents of the two conceptually opposing perspectives on the staging of ancient Greek theatre has persisted and continues to be fought to the present, perhaps

⁴Ibid., p. 91.

not as bitterly as in the past and perhaps, to the benefit of both sides, as a healthy alternative to artistic complacency and stagnation.

Karolos Koun was the quintessential representative of this generation of young directors and while he was not new on the scene by the 1950s he was, for all practical purposes, new in the realm of ancient Greek drama. Central to Koun's vision of classical theatre was the belief that it was a product of two cultural influences; that of the mysterious (barbarian) East and that of the Hellenized West; a kind of Dionysian and Apolonian union whose finest poetic expression became Attic comedy and tragedy: "I don't think I ever overlooked the fact that ancient theatre is. . . a theatre that took form and operated at the crossroads of East and West."⁵ Aesthetically, this notion had an enormous influence on his approach to ancient Greek drama because he saw modern Greece as being in the same precarious geographical position between East and West as ancient Hellas, a notion that was further reinforced by his own Levantine origins. Modern Greek culture is, of course, an undisputed blend of occidental and oriental influences, and it is this kind of blend that Koun always endeavored to recreate in his productions of classical drama.

Koun also believed that the modern Greeks were the most "immediate heirs of ancient Greek theatre." Although

⁵Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, p. 55.

he would not deny the universal appeal of the ancients or the truth that all mankind is the beneficiary of their creative output, he felt that today's Greeks, by virtue of their geographical and linguistic closeness shared a unique cultural affinity with their distant forerunners that was distinctly and unmistakably Greek:

No matter how many centuries have gone by, no matter how much we admit to the changes suffered by our people in the course of time, we cannot ignore the fact that we live under the same sky, that the same sun shines on us and that we are nourished by the same earth. The geological and atmospheric conditions that influence and shape our daily life and thought are the same. The same shores and the same distant line on the horizon where the sky meets the sea. The same rocks and the same sunburnt mountains, the endless twilights, the days and nights, and, most importantly, high above, the sky, clean and firm.

The forms molded by our thoughts and feelings today draw, by necessity, their shape and color from the same nature that embraced our ancient ancestors. . . . In the Greek village, in the Greek island and generally in the countryside, where the mechanical civilization of our century has not yet penetrated and where man lives and works in direct contact with nature, the rhythms of life, the shapes, and even the sounds must display an incredible similarity to the rhythms, shapes, and sounds imprinted in history by the life of ancient Greece.⁶

With regard to the theatre, this meant that the modern Greeks, because of their language and because of their country's characteristic physical and environmental attributes, possessed a natural advantage in the understanding and interpretation of ancient Greek drama that surpassed in importance, for the Greeks, even the most fascinating idea that any domestic or foreign scholarship

⁶Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, p. 33.

could offer on the subject. Moreover, the strong linguistic link between the two distant epochs was enough to convince most Greeks that the ancients were not just natives of the same land but also their biological ancestors, and that ancient culture had been naturally absorbed and assimilated in what constitutes modern Greek culture today. Thus, as the descendants of the ancients, influenced by the same environment and landscape, and speaking a language that was organically connected to the one spoken in antiquity, Koun felt that today's Greeks had an overwhelming advantage over any other country for an intrinsically Greek interpretation of ancient Greek theatre:

. . . we younger Greeks have a great advantage that we can live and distinguish, on a daily basis, forms, shapes, rhythms and sounds the same way, more or less, that the simple ancient Greek experienced and distinguished them; the same way that Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes experienced and distinguished them as the days rolled by, sometimes eventful, sometimes simple, at times anguishing and at others peaceful, while their minds and souls weaved their creations. Thus, if we wish to interpret their theatre creatively, let us approach and distinguish all those things that entered consciously or subconsciously into their soul, let us recognize the great secrets revealed to them by nature, the sky, the sea, the stone, the sun and the man upon this rock [the Acropolis] and under this sun.

These living elements that also exist around us today in this land will help us know and feel the thought and poetry of their work much better than the worthiest of attention of erudite knowledge and historical studies on the outer form of an ancient dramatic performance.⁷

⁷Ibid., p. 33.

Accepting the theory of organic connection with their distant ancestors also allowed the modern Greeks to become more trusting of their instincts towards ancient Greek drama and less dependent on scholarly enlightenment. At the same time, however, considering themselves the descendants of the ancients did not automatically mean that they also had an easier time with the interpretation of ancient Greek drama. In fact the task became more difficult and more demanding, since they now had to learn to distinguish between what was characteristically Greek and what was not. They had to weed out what was arbitrarily imposed by foreign influence and retain what was indigenous to their culture:

. . . A foreigner--a German, a Frenchman, an American--has no other obligation but to feel and be inspired by the ancient text and to present the work in a living theatrical manner, after he adapts it to the demands of the contemporary spectator. For us Greeks, however, it is necessary above all else to protect ourselves from foreign staging influences and to avoid foreign interpretations even if they come from countries that have had much longer modern theatrical traditions than ours. Although great sentiments may be universal and although the human organism may react the same in all geographical planes, the expression differs. Grandeur and awe are depicted one way in the East and another way in the West. The cry of calamity will sound differently at the Equator than at the Steppes.⁸

One of the indelible marks of history left on the modern Greek psyche is an identity crisis which, at its worst, manifested itself in two disastrous military campaigns (1898 and 1922), a civil war (1946-1950) and, more

⁸Ibid., p. 35-36.

recently, a seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974). Koun believed that the best way for the modern Greeks to begin approaching the theatre of the past was by getting to know themselves better in the present. This meant that they had to come to terms with their identity problem not by measuring themselves up to something that they are not--such as the much romanticized ancients for example--but by examining and accepting themselves in relation to their own times. Only by recognizing the countless physical and cultural qualities in the present that were also shared by the Greeks of two and a half thousand years ago could they embark on an organic reinterpretation of ancient Greek drama:

We Greeks must take inside us the Greece that exists today in order to get to know our ancient poets. Let us realize then and learn to love everything offered to us by today's Greek reality in terms of shape, rhythm, color and sound; the spiritual and intellectual wealth, everything around us that is still preserved and is still alive since the time of the ancients. Let us turn to the simple physical realities that touched their soul and shaped their thought and gave eternal meaning and poetry to their verses.

The Greece that exists today will help us Greeks to avoid all that is dead in the outer form of ancient Greek theatre and allow us to present freely--scenically and directorially, and adjusted to the theatrical space and spectator demands of our time--a work which was written two thousand years ago and which remains, in its essence, alive.⁹

Until 1957 Koun's experience with ancient Greek theatre had been limited to seven productions, six of which were mounted in the thirties, prior to the founding of the

⁹Ibid., p. 36.

Theatro Technis. Five of these productions were staged in conjunction with the Kollegeio Athinon and the Laiki Skini and included Aristophanes' The Birds, The Frogs and Plutus, and Euripides' Alcestis and Cyclops. The artistic approach to all five plays was characteristic of the style later defined by Koun as Popular Expressionism: a non-representational approach whose principles of production derived strongly from traditional but familiar folk and ethnic elements rather than from well-meaning, theoretical assumptions on the correct interpretation and staging of ancient Greek theatre. Although none of the plays staged by Koun during that era presumed to be more than amateur productions (none of the actors were professionally trained and most of them were not yet in their twenties) many of them were critically acclaimed for their originality, freshness and imagination. Furthermore, they helped not only to establish Koun's reputation in his profession but also to formulate some of the fundamentals of his aesthetic approach that remained with him for the rest of his life.

In 1939, following the dissolution of the Laiki Skini and his subsequent resignation from the Kollegeio, Koun was elevated to the status of a "professional" when he was commissioned to direct a series of plays for the Kotopouli Company. One of those plays was Sophocles' Electra, with the semi-retired star actress Marica Kotopouli in the title role. Although the play did not fare badly

with the critics and press, Koun conceded, years later, that his function in that particular production was only nominal since the temperamental "diva" was too reluctant to take direction, particularly from a young and relatively unknown director.¹⁰ Moreover, their theatrical approach was conceptually different, for while Koun sought total integration and oneness in his direction, Kotopouli, like a true product of the late 19th century, sought to highlight herself and downplay everything else. With his role reduced to being simply the carrying agent of Kotopouli's instructions, the production did not bear the stamp of Koun's unique personal style and he himself refused to regard it as one of his own.

Koun's next and last attempt at ancient Greek theatre prior to 1957 was an ill-fated production of Aeschylus' The Libation Bearers in the winter of 1945. This was his first effort at classical drama with the Theatro Technis and his first directorial attempt at Aeschylean tragedy for which he would be recognized years later as one of the great masters. Unfortunately, the production went practically unnoticed because of the outbreak that winter of the civil war that brought Athens to a virtual standstill. The play, however, is fondly remembered by the theatre historian Giannis Sideris who, in his introduction to Theatro Technis 1942-1972 wrote:

¹⁰Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp. 65-71.

. . . In this masterpiece Karolos sought to offer his public, with the help of the play's solid lyricism, a healing of the soul which was further aided by the play's tragic and religious poetry presented through a five-member chorus. The mis-en-scene, which was not at all typically ancient, is now sweetly remembered, with its somewhat brick color, in that small space in the Alikis theatre. There was no rhetoric or pose. Koun is a great master who was able to present on stage the tragic sorrows in their mute, inner expression. Ever since that time he has been able, quite ingeniously, to connect ancient tragedy with the present.¹¹

Thus, with only seven productions of classical theatre in his entire career (six of them staged prior to the founding of the Teatro Technis) Koun returned to ancient Greek drama in the summer of 1957. The play chosen to commemorate this momentous return was an old favorite, Aristophanes' Plutus, which he had staged twenty-five years earlier (1932) with the students of the Kollegeio Athinon. Koun's love and interest in Aristophanes' work was a lifelong affair, due largely to the fact that he believed his dramas to be as politically and socially relevant today as they were when first written:

Aristophanes, in all his comedies, lampoons gods, priests and those in power. In The Acharnians he places the poet and only the poet as a worthy advisor to the people. The gods are immoral, the bosses and the chiefs are oppressive and tyrannical. Wars and conquests, imperialistic views are all weapons of those with power. In The Birds, in the new city which is created, Nephelococcygia, the very first arrivals from Athens are the representatives of imperialism headed by the town planner, the ambassador and the dealer of laws--modern and representative characters. If that's not living, modern theatre with modern analogies in all the issues that concern today's humanity there would be no reason for its revival.

¹¹ Teatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

I refer specifically to Aristophanes because there is a widespread feeling that he was conservative and counter-progressive. But for me, if his theatre is not revolutionary theatre with solid messages for the world we live in today, I don't know what is.¹²

The production of Plutus also signaled Koun's return to the aesthetics of Popular Expressionism with the important difference that now they did not unequivocally prescribe style and form but were a part of his overall artistic expression; they were the ingredient not the product. Furthermore, Koun had twenty-five years of theatrical experience behind him and an ensemble of professionally trained actors any of which could measure up to the finest professional actors in the commercial theatre.

It is essential to note here that at the root of Popular Expressionism lies a key to Koun's aesthetics. From the very beginning of his career Koun had expressed a great affinity for the common man and a profound love and admiration for and identification with his culture and tradition. This affinity eventually became a prism through which he saw all his work in the theatre. It manifested itself for the first time in the early thirties, largely as a result of the influence of the painter and writer Fotis Kondoglou, and remained a part of him throughout his life. Kondoglou was one of the first to emphasize the richness inherent in the modern Greek cultural heritage and its indispensability to anyone seeking to find an artistic

¹²Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 64-5.

expression that is intrinsically Greek. This genuinely ethnic culture, of course, was the heritage of the common Greek who, in view of the country's sad history of the past five hundred years, continued to remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Apart from that, there was very little of any other culture to consider other than the elitist culture of the bourgeois which was only marginally Greek and mostly Western European.

In the common man Koun found his best source of inspiration, regardless of whether he was working on Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Ibsen or Ionesco. The Greek common man, as the dominant and most unaffected cultural entity of contemporary Greece, was Koun's artistic point of reference. Nowhere was this more apparent than in his choice of actors who were usually selected from the ranks of the less fortunate of the social strata as part of his overall effort to maintain a theatre company that would best reflect the color and mood of modern Greece. In the unaffected faces of the islanders, the rural mainlanders and the poor but spirited city dwellers caught up in the country's rapid industrialization, Koun felt the heartbeat of the country's population. Popular Expressionism itself was an attempt at codifying an aesthetic approach derived from the culture and tradition of the common man. Even long after Koun had transcended the artistic limitations of Popular Expressionism he remained strongly connected to the

common man and to the Greek cultural and traditional heritage. In essence, this connection was the fundamental basis of his artistic persona, serving him as a guide throughout his entire career.

Koun's production of Plutus was commissioned as part of the 1957 Athens annual summer festival. The play was first shown in Athens but later taken to Thessaloniki, in the north of Greece, and presented at the city's Municipal Park Theatre which was fast becoming a home away from home for the Theatro Technis during the summer months. The production relied quite strongly on Popular Expressionism for its aesthetic line, particularly in such areas as set design, music and dance. The music, composed by Manos Chadzidakis, was inspired by the old rembetica songs which fall, unquestionably, in the category of Popular Culture. The ancient Kordax, danced by the chorus (a licentious, Dionysian phallic dance incorporated in ancient Greek and later Roman comedy), was substituted for the macho, sexually charged dance of the rembetes. The set was decorated by colorful, two-dimensional flats with rudimentary suggestions of antiquity, while the stage proper, with the exception of a few props, was kept empty and free for the unfolding of the play's action. Costuming was also very colorful and suggestive of the ancient tunic and cloak. Bold anachronisms such as the use of an old victrola to

provide music or references to contemporary events in the play's text were freely and unselfconsciously used.

The liberty taken by Koun in his interpretation of Plutus did not go unnoticed by the critics. In fact it ignited something of a controversy, particularly in the use of the chorus and its seemingly ribald and coarse conduct during the dances. In his efforts at drawing tangible parallels between the play and the present Koun unavoidably had to make bold and imaginative artistic decisions in order to render the play more accessible to a contemporary audience. The unconventional nature of those decisions, however, immediately incurred the wrath of the purists who accused him of having turned his artistic freedom into absolute license and of having desecrated the name of Aristophanes. The overall critical response to Koun's Plutus, nevertheless, was not just one-sided; praise and denouncements were equally apportioned. Summing up the importance of the production, the editors of the September 1957 issue of the Art Review [Epitheorisi Technis] aptly assessed that:

. . . The many discussions and recriminations surrounding the production of Plutus by the Theatro Technis of Karolos Koun are already a token to the vitality and significance of his contribution. . . . It remains a fact that the presentation of Plutus was the worthiest contribution to this year's [Athens Summer] Festival.¹³

¹³Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

What most critics seemed to attack in Koun's production of Plutus was its modernity, its relevance to modern times made possible through the director's unconventional methods. Alexandros Symeonidis, however, a professor of philology at the University of Thessaloniki, held a different view and, in an attempt to describe the essence of Koun's contribution in Plutus, remembered a conversation that he had chanced to overhear between two spectators during one of the play's performances:

. . . With simple words they tried to express their awe and admiration that an "ancient Greek" was able to describe and "foresee"--as they believed--with such living intensity their own life, the life of the simple people of today. I believe that this unaffected conversation captures with greater vitality the meaning of the immortality of antiquity's great comedian which was revealed, by the great stagecraft of Koun, to the simple and uninitiated better than any academic instruction could.¹⁴

If Koun's Plutus caused something of a controversy over his unconventional interpretation of an ancient Greek text, his following production, which came exactly two years later, created a downright scandal. The play was The Birds, another comedy by Aristophanes, and again a work he had staged earlier in his career, more than a quarter of century before, with the students of the Kollegeio Athinon. As with Plutus, The Birds was commissioned for the Athens annual summer festival and was scheduled for performance in

¹⁴Theatro Technis, Karolos Koun, 25 chronia theatro, p. 80.

September of 1959 at the Odeum of Herodes Atticus. This was the first time the Theatro Technis was given the opportunity by the Greek Tourist Organization, in recognition of the company's achievements, to perform in one of Greece's ancient theatres. Once more, Popular Expressionism played an important role in the overall artistic interpretation of the play. The sets and costumes were designed by Giannis Tsarouchis, a veteran exponent of Greek folk and popular art, who had co-founded the Laiki Skini with Koun in the 1930s and who was now enjoying the reputation of being one of the country's most distinguished painters. The music was once again composed by Manos Chadzidakis.

Koun's basic artistic approach to The Birds was not different from the one taken in Plutus. The difference was in the plays themselves. Unlike Plutus (388 B.C.) which came chronologically after the end of Athenian democracy, The Birds (414 B.C.) belongs to a period when the city's government, albeit weakened by war, continued to be democratic and Athens was still more than a decade away from the military defeat (403 B.C.) that would lead to its eventual decline. Consequently, as Greek comedy, The Birds belongs to a somewhat different genre than Plutus; a genre that was shaped by the rise and fall of 5th century B.C. Athenian democracy whereas Plutus, as a genre, belongs to the era that followed it. The Birds belongs to:

. . . that type of play which came to be known as the Old Comedy--grotesque, wanton, vulgar, sharp with stinging wit, and richly lyrical; a fantastic exhibition in which the latest gossip of the city was intermixed with material of the most imaginative sort; in which serious political and philosophical purpose jostled with buffoonery of the lowest. This is the Gilbert and Sullivan opera in a land where no Victorian taboos were set upon playwrights or performances, where anything might be said and almost anything done. The shriek of the magpie and the chattering of apes mingle here with the exquisite melodies of the nightingale.¹⁵

It is precisely this kind of merriment embodied in Aristophanes' play that Koun hoped to recapture in his production of The Birds. At the same time, however, he was not interested in staging a literal translation of the play where much of its humor would be lost in references that are meaningless to a modern viewer. Instead, he wanted to recreate the bawdy and ribald gaiety of Aristophanic humor in terms that would make the play fully relevant and accessible to a contemporary audience. To achieve this he had to rely first and foremost on a vernacular translation that did not aim, as was the standard practice, to conceal with pseudo-lyricism Aristophanes' often lewd and suggestive language. Furthermore he had to adapt parts of the text, as he did with Plutus, particularly in scenes brimming with social and political satire, in order to make them relevant to the times. He also had to attribute modern traits to the play's characters that would make them

¹⁵Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama From Aeschylus to Anouilh (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949) pp. 90-91.

distinctly recognizable to a modern audience. All this was achieved without affecting or altering the play's plot and without editing any of its scenes. Although a modernized interpretation, Koun's version of The Birds remained, in essence, more faithful to its original than all the literal versions that had been seen thus far on the Greek stage.

No one foresaw the furor Koun's production of The Birds would unleash before it could even complete its first performance. According to several newspaper accounts of the day, the theatre in that fateful September evening was filled nearly to capacity. Present among the spectators was also Kostandinos Tsatsos, a conservative cabinet minister and head, at the time, of the Greek Tourist Organization. Anxiety pervaded the audience from the very start of the performance of Koun's daring and, at times, provocative production. This anxiety manifested itself either through frequent interruptions of loud applause by impassioned enthusiasts of Koun's work, or through increasing hissing and heckling by those who took offense, as some newspapers noted, at such things as "the tone of the actors' voices," "the loudness of the music" and the non-Aristophanic references to "English pounds," "rockets, airplanes, high-rise buildings and holy places."

The straw that broke the camel's back, however, was the moment when the priest who was preparing to sacrifice a sheep to the new gods of Nephelococcygia was represented as

a modern Greek priest who spoke in what resembled the Byzantine chanting of the Greek Orthodox liturgy. At that moment the audience's agitation grew to a veritable pandemonium as some spectators shouted "disgrace, disgrace, stop the performance," while others counteracted by trying to drown the protesters with loud applause and by shouting "democracy, democracy" and "out with the reactionaries." The chaos that ensued lasted several minutes forcing the performance to come to a halt. Mr. Tsatsos, repulsed at Koun's irreverence, left the theatre in the midst of the confusion and the following day he exercised his authority as president of the Greek Tourist Organization by ordering the suspension of all subsequent scheduled performances of The Birds as part of the government-sponsored Athens Festival. After the agitation subsided the company was able to resume the play and, since most of the disapproving spectators had left the theatre, was able to finish the performance without further incident.

The critical response in the following day's newspapers was almost unanimous in denouncing Koun's version of The Birds, particularly for his "sacrilegious" depiction of a Greek orthodox priest, his use of Vasili Rota's translation and his intentional blatant anachronisms. With only a few exceptions from loyal devotees, the production was deemed one of the biggest artistic failures, a "fiasco" of the modern Greek stage. This was a golden opportunity

for theatre critics to join forces and luxuriate in their skill for irony, sarcasm and self-righteousness. They lashed out mercilessly at Koun and the Theatro Technis, sparing no words. Some of them even went so far as to accuse the spectators who liked the production of being communist agitators¹⁶. Responding to the deluge of negative criticism Koun tried to defend his position in one of the dailies, especially with regard to the seemingly surprised reaction of the Greek Tourist Organization at his interpretation of the play:

I remain astonished at Mr. Tsatsos' decision. I staged The Birds according to the spirit of Aristophanes and in a style that I have followed for twenty-five years. The people responsible for this year's Athens Festival have had in their possession the script of my adapted version of The Birds long enough and were present at the play's rehearsals enough times to have known the way I stage Attic comedy. Therefore, they should have made their remarks a lot sooner. Furthermore, two years ago and also under the aegis of the Athens Festival, I staged Plutus in a similar manner. It is also a known fact that in ancient times when Aristophanes' plays were performed they also scandalized the public and provoked a whole range of reactions. I repeat that I respected the spirit of Aristophanes. Wherever appropriate I used modern words or represented a character not exactly in the way he is depicted in the play but in the way we would encounter him in our times. Otherwise the public would not have understood anything. In any event, after the suspension of the rest of the performances many ethical and economic problems are created.¹⁷

¹⁶Most of the information with regard to the Theatro Technis's 1959 production of The Birds is derived from a collage of undocumented reviews in Theatro Technis 1942-1972. The book is not paginated.

¹⁷Ibid.

Koun's last remark refers to the sensitive issue of censorship raised by the suspension of the performances and the economic hardship the Theatro Technis would incur if the government refused to grant the company the funding it had promised for staging The Birds. Although nothing could justify the overwhelming negative response to the play, particularly by the press and the staff of the Greek Tourist Organization, the production was also not without its weaknesses and shortcomings. Asked in a newspaper interview two years later, at a time when the play was experiencing a remarkable resurgence in popularity, to explain to what he attributed the "ill fortune" of the original production Koun refrained from ascribing blame to those who had unfairly attacked the play and briefly replied:

The performance was not ripe, many vital elements did not come together. The music played one thing and the chorus said another. There were, of course, a few sharp edges which later had to be removed.¹⁸

The purpose of dwelling at such great length on this particular production of the Theatro Technis is that whereas it was branded an "utter failure" when it was first produced, within a few short years a twist of fate transformed it into one of Koun's greatest theatrical accomplishments and established The Birds as his signature piece. Ironically, the scandal and notoriety hovering over

¹⁸F. Kleanthis, Ta Nea (Athens), 11 June 1962.

the original production created the finest publicity the play could receive. Determined not to yield to the critics' mass hysteria Koun, feeling confident in the quality of his work, decided to have the play staged independently and, starting the following year, his much berated version of The Birds began rapidly and somewhat inexplicably to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of both public and critics. Although changes were made in the course of time, such as redesigning the costumes or re-choreographing the movement of the chorus, the subsequent productions remained fundamentally faithful to the original.

So swift, in fact, was the transformation of the play in the public's and critics' opinion that within two short years many of the critics who damned the original production were now raving about it, and the public came in throngs to attend the performances. I. T. Kakridis, a skeptical and apprehensive philology professor at the University of Thessaloniki whose reservations at the modern "boulevard theatre style" productions of ancient Greek comedy were not totally unjustified, claimed that after seeing Koun's The Birds he understood for the first time what ancient Greek comedy meant, with its "delicious foulmouthedness," and confessed that:

Within seconds after the performance had begun I had forgotten that I was a philologist, I had forgotten my apprehensions and my critical spirit had been tempered. The superb performance succeeded in creating the ideal of a perfect production: to make me a simple spectator, with an increased artistic sensibility, but without any

need to rationalize it. I laughed wholeheartedly during the comic scenes, I thoroughly enjoyed the songs and choreographed movements of the birds and I shifted with absolute ease from the comical to the lyrical passages. The loosely constructed final scenes did not bother me at all, nor did the problem of the chorus. The question of whether the solution was the best did not concern me at all. The words of Aristophanes, given such physicality had conquered me completely.

When the performance was over I understood for the first time in my life what Dionysian intoxication meant. I was carried beyond human worries and pettiness, beyond my very self and became possessed with a spiritual euphoria that I have rarely felt, a euphoria that stayed with me for several days until life forced me once again into its narrow confines.¹⁹

The controversy surrounding The Birds and its subsequent reassessment and redemption also helped establish Koun's and the Theatro Technis's reputation abroad. It began with an invitation in July 1962 from the Festival des Nations in Paris, representatives of which had seen the production two years earlier in Athens, to perform the play for three evenings at the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt. The trip to Paris proved a great success and further enhanced the reputation of the company and its director. When the Theatro Technis returned to Greece it brought with it a stack of accolades from France's leading newspapers and the award for best international entry in the 1962 Festival des Nations.

The success of the Theatro Technis's first venture in Western Europe soon led to another foreign invitation, this time from British theatrical entrepreneur Peter

¹⁹Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

Daubeney, requesting the company's participation in the celebration of Shakespeare's four hundredth birthday in the spring of 1964. Once again the trip proved a resounding success and the British press was unanimous in its acclaim of the production, as expressed in this review by Harold Hobson of the Sunday Times:

With the Greek Art Theatre Company's production of Aristophanes's The Birds, the Peter Daubeney international season at the Aldwych has leapt back into its top form. The gaiety, zest and swerve of Karolos Koun's direction. . . make this evening the most joyous we have had in London since the Comédie-Française's Un fil à la patte.

I had expected to have to treat The Birds with respect. After all, they are Greek and originally spoke in the most supple and musical of languages, and they have endured for a very long time. Westminster Abbey is to them only a precocious junior and Shakespeare a writer in this month's magazines. What I had not reckoned on is the spontaneous enjoyment, the exhilaration and the swift pleasure which this entertainment gives. It is almost incredible that when the play was first presented in 414 B.C., Aristophanes received only the Second Prize. Had he had Mr. Koun to produce him then, surely he would have been given a more splendid reward.

Much is said, and rightly, on the contemporaneity of classic Greek comedy. . . . But the delight to be gained from The Birds comes only in a very small measure from its identifications with modern problems. It is possible to miss all these and yet find the play refreshing. Mr. Koun has discovered in it a movement, an appeal to the eye and a seduction to the ear, that would have enchanted Charles Cochran.²⁰

The Theatro Technis gave altogether fifteen performances of The Birds at the Aldwych, all of them to sold-out audiences and was described by some critics as the "highlight" of the festival. The premier performance and

²⁰Harold Hobson, Sunday Times (London), 17 May 1964.

the reception that followed it were attended by an array of dignitaries and celebrities headed by Prince Philip himself. It included the Greek ambassador to England, theatre director Peter Hall, composer Gian Carlo Menotti and actors Sir Laurence Olivier, Dame Edith Evans, Peter O'Toole and Tom Courtenay among others. Peter Hall, on behalf of the Royal Shakespeare Company, sent a telegram to the Greek government thanking it for Greece's contribution to the festival and describing the Theatro Technis as the company which "resurrected classical Greek theatre."²¹ Koun himself, in an interview at the time, described the day of the premier of The Birds in London as "the greatest and most poignant day of my life."²²

By now no critic at home would contest the artistic merits of Koun's production of The Birds. In fact most of them were caught up in the euphoria of tributes from the foreign press which was compounded by their pride that a Greek theatre company was receiving international recognition, particularly from countries that had had such long and rich theatrical traditions. The success of those first tours to France and England led to other invitations from abroad including Germany, Italy, Poland, the Soviet Union, as well as several return engagements to London and Paris. Wherever the company performed, it received the same

²¹Eleftheria (Athens), 22 May 1964.

²²E. Psirakis, To Vima (Athens), 27 May 1964.

outstanding notices, the same tributes. Roman Szydtowski of the Tribuna Ludu in Warsaw described the audience's reaction at the end of the play as an "apotheosis rare in the chronicles of Warsaw which has seen so many great theatre companies."²³ In his view the greatest revelation of Koun's production--and here he echoed the sentiments of many of the critics who had seen the play--was in his treatment of the chorus:

. . . The chorus is not only dynamic and lively throughout the duration of the performance but constitutes an organic element of the spectacle. It has an equal share with the protagonists and finds itself in contact with them. It doesn't only comment on the events but takes an active part in the action.²⁴

It is no coincidence, therefore, that many people were now beginning to discuss, sometimes at great length, Koun's unusual and innovative handling of the chorus in his staging of ancient Greek drama; a discussion that has persisted, at times approvingly and occasionally disapprovingly, to the present. Koun saw the chorus as the heartbeat of classical drama, be it comedy or tragedy. He considered it the true protagonist whose most critical function was to serve as the link between the action and the audience, not as a simple intermediary but as the catalyst of the play's meaning. In a speech dealing with the modern director and ancient drama, delivered at the International

²³Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p.

²⁴Ibid.

Theatre Conference in Athens in 1976, Koun addressed his views on the chorus and the importance he attached to it as the leading exponent of the poet's vision:

The principal component in ancient drama is always the chorus. With verbal and implied meaning, with sound and music, with movement and plasticity, the chorus creates the mood of the play, illuminates the heroes and with its passion projects the poet's messages. The chorus is that which must touch us, transport us and expose to our subconscious, with its great sentiments, those meanings which the poet wants to impart. The chorus is that which unsettles the spectator and creates within him the appropriate exaltation to become an initiated recipient of the poetry and truth of the poet's vision.²⁵

With this in mind it comes as no surprise that when Koun undertook in 1965 to stage his first ancient Greek tragedy in nearly twenty years he chose a play by Aeschylus, the oldest of the tragedians and the one in whose work the chorus is most dominant and in some cases, as in The Suppliants, the protagonist. The play selected was The Persians, perhaps the oldest extant tragedy and paradoxically the only one that breaks from mythology--although Aeschylus endows the subject with mythological grandeur--and deals with a historical event that occurred within the playwright's lifetime.

Koun saw the hubris that leads to the downfall of the Persian Empire in Aeschylus' The Persians as an allegory for the perils of modern imperialism and political hegemony: "central to The Persians is conquering violence,

²⁵Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, p.68.

which is not limited to the destruction of the Persians but extends to every country."²⁶ There is much in the tragedy that relates to modern times, but to the modern Greeks the play has additional connotations. Although a tragedy of defeat for the Persian Empire, it is also a celebration of the Greek spirit and an implied triumph for "democracy" and the will of the people. Lines such as "they are not slaves of man, they have no kings" and "now the people can speak without fear" are pregnant with meaning for a people that have suffered so much oppression and foreign interference in their history, including the installation of a Bavarian monarchy by Western powers in the nineteenth century. Ironically, however, it would also be only two years before a CIA-backed military coup d'état, in April of 1967, would once again restore oppression and fear for the Greeks for a period of seven years.

The production of The Persians was another decisive event in Koun's career, not only because of the play's enormous success both at home and abroad but because it also encouraged Koun's interest and passion in the tragedian's work which led to the staging of all but one of Aeschylus' tragedies over the next two decades. The only play by Aeschylus Koun did not stage was The Suppliants, and that was perhaps because of the enormous difficulties posed by its fifty-member chorus. Koun also shared similar

²⁶ Akropolis (Athens), 17 December 1978.

feelings for the plays of Aristophanes, which is attested by the fact that from 1957 until the time of his death he staged all of the comic playwright's works with the exception of The Clouds and The Ecclesiazusae. In contrast to Aeschylus and Aristophanes Koun directed only two plays by Sophocles and two by Euripides.

The only difference in the fate of The Persians and the fate of its predecessor The Birds is that The Persians did not start with a scandal. Otherwise both plays shared in the same phenomenal success, and just as The Birds is regarded today in Greece as a landmark in the modern staging of attic comedy, so The Persians is regarded a landmark in the staging of ancient Greek tragedy. The Persians was able to elude the wrath of the critics at home perhaps because it was purposely premiered not in Greece but at the Aldwych theatre in London, in April of 1965, during a return engagement of the Theatro Technis. The play was presented as part of a double bill, which included a repeat of The Birds, and was received by the British public and press with the same wave of enthusiasm that had greeted Aristophanes' comedy a year earlier. The company performed once again to sold-out audiences and received the unanimous endorsement of the press. Critics such as Penelope Gilliat of the Observer, Harold Hobson of the Sunday Times, Bernard Levin of the Daily Mail, Milton Shoulman of the Evening Standard, W. A. Darlington of the Daily Telegraph, Philip Hope Wallace

of the Guardian and Alan Riddell of the Daily Telegraph lavished their compliments on Koun and the Theatro Technis and Anthony Burgess of the Spectator declared that:

. . . Having seen these two outstanding performances we can now reevaluate the familiar saying "the glory that was Greece" and conjugate the verb in the present tense²⁷

After London the play went to Paris at the Théâtre des Nations. Once again it met the same spectacular reception, and the French critics unanimously praised the production. Claude Baignères of the Figaro described the performance as a "symphonic masterpiece in which the chorus is the soloist and where each one of its members is an instrument in the service of sorrow."²⁸ Gilles Sandier of Arts was simply awed:

. . . It is something breathtaking. It begins like an orthodox liturgy, progresses like a naval battle--the chorus of elders with their open sails exposed to the wind batter themselves like the Persian ships--continues like an African ritual (the appeal to the dead king Darius), and ends with an apocalyptic and biblical lament.²⁹

After Paris the Theatro Technis went to Munich where it completed its triumphant tour of The Persians in Western Europe. Finally, in August of that year the production was premiered in Greece, at the Odeum of Herodes Atticus, and the Greeks responded with the same kind of fervent

²⁷Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p. (my translation of a translation).

²⁸Claude Baignères, Le Figaro (Paris), 29 April 1965.

²⁹Gilles Sandier, Arts (Paris), 1 May 1965.

enthusiasm. Some critics did grumble, however, and one in particular, writing for the magazine Theatro, accused Koun of having staged a "Hebraic version of The Persians" and wondered why "hasn't any official thought of preventing his exports of ancient Greek drama."³⁰ Fortunately such inane comments were kept to a minimum and most critics of stature could not help but agree with their European counterparts, particularly with regard to Koun's unique and innovative use of the chorus that liberated the production from the geometrical group movement and stilted declamations of common practice. Furthermore Koun endowed every member of the chorus with an unprecedented individuality and intensity of feeling that was described by one critic as the "modern resurrection of passion in the chorus which was nothing more than the very breath of Karolos Koun."³¹

Two months later the Theatro Technis was back on foreign tracks again, this time taking The Persians and The Birds to Poland and the Soviet Union for a yet another triumphant tour. Once again the critic of the Tribuna Ludu echoed the same sentiments for The Persians as he had earlier for The Birds:

The enthusiasm with which the demanding Warsaw public greeted Karolos Koun's The Birds was further increased and made decidedly more secure following The

³⁰Quoted in a letter by Giannis Christou, the composer of the music for The Persians, to Allagi (Athens) January 1 1967.

³¹Alexis Diamandopoulos, Mesimvrini (Athens), 24 October 1965.

Persians. The Theatro Technis has won a total and complete victory. The lament of the chorus and of the protagonists lasted for two hours, and for two hours, without understanding a single word of the modern Greek text, we understood everything. We participated in a great mystery, absorbed, oblivious and captivated by its magic. There is in Karolos Koun's The Persians an exhilarating authenticity that goes beyond period and time and bridges the gap of twenty five-centuries. Synchronization along with a faithful concentration on the fundamental elements of tragedy--that is the secret that this modern Greek theatre company triumphed over. And that is why the ever increasing recognition it is receiving all over the world is something that it truly deserves.³²

Thus with The Birds and The Persians Koun established himself as a leading proponent of ancient Greek drama not only in his own country but in an international context. The productions were landmarks in his career, as he himself described them. They constituted a basis for all his subsequent productions, a kind of confirmation that the aesthetic principles which he believed in and defended, especially with regard to classical drama, were not the quixotic schemes of some romantic visionary but ideas whose time had come. Both plays remained active in the company's repertory and when a tribute was paid to Koun in the summer of 1987, several months after his death, it was The Birds and The Persians that were shown to capacity audiences at the Odeum of Herodes Atticus and the ancient theatre of Epidauros. Similarly, that same year, when the Third International Meeting of Ancient Greek Drama, held annually

³²Theatro Technis, Theatro Technis 1942-1972, n.p. (my translation of a translation).

at Delphi, was dedicated to the stagecraft of Koun, the two plays chosen to be presented at the stadium of Delphi were once again The Birds and The Persians. Asked in an interview by Giorgos Pilichos, shortly before his death, to comment on his teaching and interpretation of ancient Greek drama in relation to others, Koun quite stoically replied:

. . . Who, among all who have occupied themselves to the present with ancient drama--be they Greeks or foreigners--can say with certainty that their way of reviving ancient drama corresponds to its authentic interpretation. We all search, we all experiment and each one of us, according to his talents and sensibilities, conveys a perspective, sometimes accepted by the connoisseurs and the public and sometimes not. As for me, they say that I effectively staged Aristophanes and Aeschylus, that my productions of The Birds and The Persians were definitive events in the modern history of interpretation of ancient drama. That recognition suffices for me. Today, however, I know that one life, or even two lives are not enough for anyone to engage himself seriously in the study and interpretation of ancient drama.³³

As mentioned earlier, Koun staged with the Theatro Technis all but one of Aeschylus' plays, nine plays by Aristophanes, Oedipus Tyrannous and Electra by Sophocles and The Bacchae and Trojan Women by Euripides. Many of the plays were kept in the company's repertory and were frequently revived throughout the years. Most of them also traveled to other countries where they continued to be greeted with great enthusiasm. The common aesthetic line running through all of Koun's productions of ancient Greek drama was that of Popular Expressionism. So strong in fact

³³Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp. 71-72.

was the influence of Popular Expressionism that some critics who were not predisposed to accept Koun's populist ideas accused him of reducing classical theatre to some kind of modern "folklore," to which Koun responded in an interview with Lilanda Lykiardopoulou of the weekly Epikaira in April of 1980:

. . . We do nothing of the sort. We simply turn to what is Greek as we live it this very moment or as we see it incorporated in the dances, the songs, the Greek fairs and all the elements of our popular culture that go as far back as antiquity.

These things are not folklore. They are reality. It is the atmosphere in which we live and cannot touch us. In 1934 when I was directing Plutus with the students of the Klegeio. . . I used to observe in the coffee shops certain street smart types and politicians with their worry beads. They offered me an entire world. So? Shouldn't I use it? Should we ignore what's around us, what touches us?

Whatever touches my sensibilities with purity, with sincerity and directness is legitimate for me. And with the same means I will endeavor to touch the sensibilities of the modern spectator.³⁴

Koun did not approach ancient Greek theatre from a systematic theoretical perspective. It was not within his nature. He was not an intellectual (in the academic sense) and never pretended to be. Nor did he ever begin work on a play having a crystallized idea of how he envisioned it on the stage or keep notes during rehearsals other than brief scribbles on scraps of paper or the back of cigarette packs. He was always driven by instinct and always trusted his intuition above all else to guide him through a production. Although he had to start with some ideas, they

³⁴Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 99-100.

were always subject to change, as it was only through his work and interaction with his actors and all the other various artists of the theatre that his full vision of a play evolved and unfolded. The most important element, however, in his choice of any kind of theatre, be it ancient or modern, was "poetry and magic." As long as these two ingredients existed, he was satisfied:

The starting point and foundation of the theatre, as in every art form, is poetry and magic. Without them theatre does not exist. In their absence there is no theatre. A theatre without them is a theatre towards which, personally, I am indifferent; I don't understand it.³⁵

³⁵Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, p.55.

CONCLUSION

Karolos Koun died on February 14, 1987, at the age of seventy-nine. In tribute to his enormous contribution to modern Greek theatre, he was given a state funeral which was attended by thousands of people from all walks of life, who came to pay their final respects to the one they called "the teacher." Present among them were countless actors, artists and political dignitaries, including the country's president Andreas Papandreou as well as representatives from all major political parties. Also present were the actress and, at the time, Minister of Culture Melina Merkouri (also a former student of Koun), the actor Alexis Minotis and many of Koun's longtime friends and colleagues such as Giannis Tsarouchis, Giorgos Lazanis (Koun's successor as head of the Teatro Technis), Lykourgos Kallergis, Marios Floritis, Reni Pittaki, Magia Lymberopoulou, Mimis Kougioumtzis, Dimitris Kechaïdis and Giorgos Armenis. Most important, however, as Koun would have been the first to acknowledge, was the presence of the thousands of common, ordinary people whose lives had been touched over the years by the Teatro Technis. They were the ones for whom the company had

originally been created and their attendance at the funeral was an impressive and poignant testimony to the fulfillment of Koun's and the Theatro Technis's purpose.

During the funeral service, impassioned eulogies were delivered in which Koun was deified and raised to the pantheon of twentieth century Greek artists. Following the church service the funeral procession transported Koun's body from the Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens to the cemetery. All along the route the thousands who had lined the streets shouted "immortal, immortal" as the hearse with the flag-covered coffin passed by. Throughout this solemn occasion order was peacefully maintained not by members of the police force but by students of the Theatro Technis who formed a human chain around the hearse to prevent the emotional public from disrupting the procession.

The formal state recognition of Koun's contribution to modern Greek theatre, as reflected in his funeral, was well deserved but not always the case while he was alive. Too often in its history, particularly in the fifties and sixties, the Theatro Technis found itself at the brink of bankruptcy and dissolution while the government pretended not to notice. Twice the company had to dissolve, first in 1946 for a year and then in 1950 for three years. In both cases, however, the essence of the Theatro Technis was kept alive by Koun who eventually succeeded, through sheer will

and determination, to revive the company and begin all over again.

This is not to imply that no support ever came from the government. Indeed, various state agencies did provide, and on a somewhat timely basis, financial assistance to the Teatro Technis, but that assistance was hardly ever sufficient to meet the company's enormous costs. Consequently Koun had to rely, for the bulk of the company's resources, on box-office receipts and occasional philanthropic donations from rich benefactors. Although helpful, box-office receipts were not sufficient to sustain a company of the scope and magnitude of the Teatro Technis and benefactors were not always there when needed. Thus, year after year, at the end of each season, the company faced large deficits which threatened to undermine its existence.

In 1968, confronted once more with the same economic hardship and the dilemma of whether or not to disband the Teatro Technis, Koun was fortunate to be rescued by a grant from the Ford Foundation which allowed the company to continue its operations for the next seven years, unhampered by financial restraints. These were also the years of the right-wing, CIA-sponsored military dictatorship (1967-1974) whose colonels had little regard for the theatre (or art in general) unless it aimed at promoting their own political agenda. Naturally, the colonels did not look very favorably

on Koun, especially since he was identified as a champion of the underdog. They consequently kept state support of the Theatro Technis to a bare minimum. It is, of course, something of a paradox that after several years of international recognition and acclaim during the sixties, the Theatro Technis would find itself again at the brink of dissolution for economic reasons. With the government unresponsive to the company's predicament, the grant from the Ford Foundation was a godsend which Koun himself described as "a most important event in the continuation of the Theatro Technis:"¹

. . . During the years of the dictatorship. . . it was only thanks to a generous grant from the Ford Foundation that the Theatro Technis was able to survive and continue to exist. Never before, in its thirty-year history, had either the country or any other local organization or individual taken an interest with regard to this [economic] matter that was realistic and with a sense of obligation. Today [1981] things have changed although the permanent recognition for the forty year work of the Theatro Technis hasn't, essentially, been completely granted and formally secured.²

Acceptance of the grant, however, did not go unnoticed by advocates of the political left who felt that the Foundation's reputation was, for whatever reason, too tarnished and that any acceptance of money from such an institution represented an acquiescence to its "corrupt" political views. Although time has proven that there was no artistic compromise on Koun's part in accepting the grant,

¹Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, p.49.

²Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to theatro, pp. 113-14.

to the upholders of leftist ideology it seemed almost a betrayal that someone whom they considered as one of their own should accept money from an institution whose parent company was regarded as the very symbol of capitalism. Asked in an interview by Giorgos Pilichos, almost fifteen years after receiving the grant, to explain why he had accepted money from an institution whose reputation "has elicited many reservations and objections, here [Greece] as well as in other countries," Koun dismissed the allegations against the Ford Foundation and vouched, at least in this particular case, for the sincerity of its intentions:

There have always been reservations and objections expressed for all grants. The point is from which people and for what real reasons have these reservations been expressed. In any event I personally never doubted for a single moment the sincerity and purity of intentions of the Ford Foundation. I hold it as a great honor that the Theatro Technis was one of the first artistic ensembles, outside of America, to be financially supported by this institution. And I feel grateful towards my good friend McNeil Lowry, known all over the world for his devoted support of the arts, for everything he did to help in the survival of the Theatro Technis. He did more for our theatre than any of our wealthy organizations did (with the exception perhaps of a few individuals that I can count on my fingers) when I was going around with a collection tray during these difficult years [the years of the dictatorship], even after the international recognition of our company. It is thanks to this man, McNeil Lowry, that we were able to continue our efforts in these trying times without any compromises and dedicated to what we believe.³

Following the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974, the economic conditions of the Theatro Technis improved (though hardships continued to be encountered from time to

³Pilichos, Karolos Koun, synomilies, pp.49-50.

time) as the government took an increasingly greater interest in the support and preservation of the company. Today the future of the Theatro Technis seems safely secured and the company is recognized by all as a national institution whose existence is unquestionably worth safeguarding. In terms of size it is second only to the National Theatre; in terms of artistic output and creation, there are those who would put Koun and the Theatro Technis at the summit of modern Greek theatre.

But if economic difficulties were a recurring threat to the Theatro Technis (particularly in the first three decades of its life), what posed an even greater danger according to Koun, was the potential compromise, for the sake of survival, of the company's artistic objectives. This compromise came in the form of commercialization where the Theatro Technis, instead of adhering to its basic tenet of being an artistic collective operating outside the influence of the commercial theatre, would have to bring itself, out of economic necessity, in line with the commercial theatre and compete with it on its own level. This, of course, was contrary to the very notion of the Theatro Technis as "art theatre" and Koun did everything within his power to avert its drifting in that direction. Judging by the reputation and distinction of the Theatro Technis at the time of Koun's death, his efforts have proved successful beyond anyone's expectations, including his own.

Although Koun remained unyielding to compromises and never allowed the Teatro Technis to enter into competition with the commercial theatre, most company members did not share the unwavering integrity of his artistic convictions and, as a result, the Teatro Technis had to endure through the years a continuous and unremitting artistic drain. Instead of remaining committed to the spiritual and organic unity demanded by Koun, company members, driven by their own desires for personal exposure, were constantly lured away by the promise of a more lucrative career in the commercial theatre. The artistic drain was, to some extent, anticipated and dealt with by bringing in new members to replace the ones who had left. This was accomplished almost exclusively through the Teatro Technis School, which was founded at the same time as the company and has served ever since as the training ground for all future company members.

In spite of Koun's strength and perseverance in maintaining the high standards upon which the Teatro Technis was founded, there were times when the enticements of the commercial theatre, combined with the artistic damage they induced, had a demoralizing effect on the company as a whole and gave rise to dissension among its members. Coupled with the perennial economic hardship, this dissension threatened on several occasions to unravel the very fiber of the Teatro Technis as a collective theatre

functioning outside the commercial sphere and as a theatre that was not bound by the rules of speculating businessmen and free of the prima donna attitudes that prevailed among conventional actors. In one such instance in 1950 Koun chose to disband the company rather than see it drift into the realm of the commercial theatre and become the antithesis of his vision:

Economic difficulties have always existed. But these difficulties you could always cope with. . . . The real difficulties, which very often almost forced the Teatro Technis to stop operations--in fact once, in the fifties, it stopped for three whole years--had almost always to do with the idea of a collective theatre and the harmonious relationships between the actors. Where a common faith, enthusiasm and a mutual goal exist, solutions can be found for all essentials and debts. When that mutual goal and faith begin to fade, however, the place of work is lost and everybody's ego. . . develops to an excess giving rise, all too often, to resentments. . . violent outbursts and the need for a new home. This is all quite human and natural but often very painful and very dangerous to the proper way of working. Furthermore, as opportunities to display oneself increase and an aimless sense of well being rises, the existence of a theatre with common goals becomes more difficult.⁴

In view of the difficulties Koun faced throughout his career, it is almost a mystery that the Teatro Technis survived half a century and continues to thrive in the present under Koun's successor Giorgos Lazanis. This phenomenal success, however, is neither a fluke nor an accident of fate. It is largely, if not entirely, the outcome of Koun's perseverance and hard work. It is the fruit of his absolute dedication to his muse and his total

⁴Ploritis, ed., Karolos Koun gia to teatro, pp. 113-14.

commitment to the idea of the Theatro Technis being on a journey whose mission is the social betterment and cultural enlightenment of the Greeks. This notion was a founding principle of the company and was matter-of-factly expressed in the opening remarks of his now proverbial speech to the Friends of the Theatro Technis given in the summer of 1943.⁵

In that speech, which has subsequently become the undeclared manifesto of the Theatro Technis, Koun spoke of his newly established company as embarking into a "mission" requiring "absolute faith and sacrifice to a higher idea." That "higher idea" was the attainment, through drama, of a "richer more beautiful and more deeply fulfilled life." Koun held steadfastly to that belief throughout his life. His own "absolute faith and sacrifice" to that "higher idea" is undisputed and evidenced by the fact that everything regarding his life, whether personal or professional, was in some way connected with the Theatro Technis. In fact one may venture to say that Koun and the Theatro Technis were one and the same.

Koun never married and had no children. His only wife was the theatre and his only family the company he founded. In October 1986, months before his death, he drew a will which was published posthumously. In keeping with his character, the will consisted of six brief clauses, all in one page, in which he bequeathed all his worldly

⁵Ibid., pp. 13-30.

possessions to what had come to be known affectionately as his "children:" the members of his company. Included in those clauses were also his final instructions regarding the future of the company:

To Giorgos Lazanis and the younger directors of the Theatro Technis I bequeath the title "Theatro Technis. . . . It is my expressed wish that my inheritors continue their collaboration at the Theatro Technis with Giorgos Lazanis at the helm."⁶

What is so remarkable about the will, besides its brevity, is the little Koun left behind in terms of material possessions. In his private life Koun was a simple, unassuming man who did not indulge in luxuries. His only indulgence was the Theatro Technis and everything he earned, everything he possessed he channelled, one way or another, back into the company. Thus, by the time of his death he had nothing more to leave behind other than a few objects of sentimental value, like his drawings, the furniture in his apartment and some miscellaneous items kept at the Theatro Technis. He had very little money. His only income came from the Theatro Technis which, after keeping what was barely essential for himself, he reinvested back into the company.

Koun's greatest bequest to all the Greek people, of course, is the rich legacy of his sixty-year involvement in Greek theatre. During his lifetime Koun succeeded in changing the face of modern Greek theatre. He rescued it

⁶I Lexi 62 (February-March 1987): 100.

from the foreign and sometimes totally alien influence of Western European practices and turned it towards domestic sources for guidance and inspiration, thus allowing for the development of an indigenous theatre. Today he is considered not only a pioneer in the growth of modern Greek theatre but also the man who almost singlehandedly ushered in a new era in Greek dramaturgy through his staging, particularly in the fifties, sixties and seventies, of works by young Greek playwrights. Equally significant is Koun's work with foreign plays where he not only revived some of the classics of the Western repertory but was also the first to introduce many of the major contemporary playwrights of the international scene. Furthermore, Koun revolutionized the modern interpretation and staging of ancient Greek drama. He rejected the traditional academic approach that prevailed and gave his own productions a folkloric and demotic flair that scandalized the Greek establishment and earned him international acclaim and recognition. Finally, through his constant teachings and unwavering support of young artists he fashioned generations of actors, directors and playwrights who are now at the forefront of modern Greek theatre.

Today the Theatro Technis is in its fourth year since Koun's death and only time will tell if Koun's dream of a collective theatre dedicated to the social and cultural advancement of the Greeks will persist. At the moment,

however, the company seems to be in very good hands. Giorgos Lazanis, who is heading the Theatro Technis at the present, is the company's only surviving member since its regroupment in 1954. As one its leading actors for many years, he has been at the forefront of its evolution and growth, living through its successes and failures and seeing it grow from a small theatre troupe to a major company of international stature. As Koun's hand-picked successor it can only be hoped that he will carry on his predecessor's work with the same zeal, dedication and artistic integrity and continue to produce the kind of theatre that has given the Theatro Technis its extraordinary character and reputation.

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